

THE NATIONAL NEGRO LABOR COUNCIL: A HISTORY

by
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Introduction

This paper was written as a senior honors thesis at Bryn Mawr College in the Spring of 1971. It is presented here in a lightly revised form. The sources for this work included original documents contributed by members of the National Negro Labor Council, the Daily Worker, and The New York Times for the appropriate years, and interviews with leaders and members of the NNLC.

Though the paper is limited in scope, I think it accurately presents the outlines of the history and role of the Council. Some areas are not dealt with here, particularly the work of the NNLC within unions. That history would require much additional research. I hope that this paper may inspire others to undertake such work, for it could add much to our understanding of the struggles of Black and white trade unionists to build democracy in the union movement.

I could not have written this paper without the assistance of many people, including most importantly my late father, Ernest Thompson. I wish to thank Mayor Coleman Young of Detroit, Michigan; Victoria Garvin, Ernest DeMaio of UE, Ewart Guinier of Harvard University; Sterling Neal of Louisville, Kentucky, and Harold and Alice Smith, all of whom shared their papers and personal recollections of the struggles of the NNLC. I am indebted to the late Jack Burch of UE for like assistance.

I would also like to thank the Daily World, William Weinstone, and the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library for their assistance. I owe much to my two advisers, Dr. Herbert Aptheker and Dr. Arthur Dudden, for their time and guidance.

Mindy Thompson

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The Roots of the NNLC

We will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans. It is a fight for ideals, lest this, our common fatherland, false to its founding, become in truth the land of the thief and the home of the slave--a by-word and a hissing among the nations for its sounding pretensions and pitiful accomplishment.¹

These words of W.E.B. Du Bois, spoken at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, in 1906, state the measure of freedom fighters: the demand for full freedom, the call to continual struggle, and the understanding that equal rights for the Black people will benefit all America. Four and a half decades later the National Negro Labor Council pledged itself to bring together the Black working class to fulfill this vision.

The idea for an organization of this type had been advanced several times in the intervening years. One of the early attempts was an organization called the American Negro Labor Congress founded in Chicago in November of 1925. Its "Call to Action" declared:

...[I]f we stop to think, there is no racial group in the world more borne down by handicaps of social restraint than the twelve million Negroes of North America. And yet the American Negro is not helpless, for today he holds a large place in the industrial life of the country and his chief weapon is his mass organizational strength. And by virtue of this, the Negro working class alone has the power with which to bring the new emancipation to the race in general. More and more we are coming to recognize this fact. But it means that this particular social force latent in the life of the race must first be mobilized, coordinated and shaped into a great national medium expressing the social, political and cultural aspirations of the race.

1. Notes begin on p. 81

That organization sought to unify the efforts of "all organizations of Negro workers and farmers as well as organizations composed of both Negro and white workers and farmers" and through this unity to advance the trade-union movement as well as the cause of Black liberation. Led by Black communists, the ANLC was effective in agitating for Blacks to join unions. Its role was limited by a combination of red-baiting, pressure from more conservative Negro groups, and its own sectarian policies. Most decisive, though, was its limited base in the trade-union movement, a reflection of the exclusion of the Black worker from basic industry.

The ANLC came at a time when American industry was being altered by powerful forces. For the Black workers this meant the breakdown of the semi-feudal situation of the Black farm workers and their movement into industry, first into unskilled labor and gradually into manufacturing and clerical work. In 1910, 50.4% of all Blacks in the labor force worked on farms. This declined steadily with the most dramatic change coming between 1940 and 1950, the decade of the twin pressures of war production and mechanization, when the figure plummeted to 10% still on the farm.

The proletarianization of the Black workers was punctuated in the 1930's by the growth of the industrial unions. In 1934, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had two and a half million members; 110,000 of these were Black, segregated in all-Black locals.

The ANLC was in fact ahead of its time in that industry and the labor movement were still begrudgingly admitting Blacks in 1925. The great upheaval in the union movement came after the depression of 1929. The CIO came forth to organize industrial workers and proved to be a triumph of coalition. In the same way that workers in different job categories put aside their differences, so Black and white workers joined together to put a base under wages and to establish and guarantee job seniority. As expressed by one author, "the very nature of industrial unionism made impractical the racial divisions common in the AFL... The CIO unions had no choice; without racial equality, the mass industrial unions could not have been built."³

For the Black community this was a period of great struggle. The middle class opposed the unions and called on the Black workers to boycott the CIO until it had given certain guarantees on

equal treatment; they were fearful of it because of their experiences with the AFL.

Even as late as September 2, 1937, when the big CIO campaign was on and many Negro leaders were supporting it, the Pittsburgh Courier stated: "In the recent drive of the CIO it was found that in almost every locality the Negro and professional groups opposed the participation of the Negro workers." According to Cayton and Mitchell, "In St. Louis, it was reported that only two preachers out of hundreds had taken any favorable interest in the unions."⁴

Yet the Black workers had no doubt where their welfare lay. They understood that they needed unity with other workers in order to protect their interests and fight the bosses. Certain of the Black intellectuals, notably Paul Robeson, joined in the campaign. At one historic meeting in Cadillac Square, Robeson sang to hundreds of thousands of workers, urging them to join unions and not be led into the false path of fighting other workers. He altered the words of Earl Robinson's "Joe Hill" to give the song universal meaning:

Where working men defend their rights,
It's there you'll find Joe Hill...

The National Negro Congress, a broad coalition of Negro church, fraternal and political groups, active 1936-1947 against Jim Crow and for trade-union unity, put its strength behind the drive. From its ranks came some of the first Black organizers of the CIO.

The CIO caused significant changes in the labor movement. There was first of all a tremendous increase in membership.

Despite persistently high levels of unemployment throughout the years 1933-1939, organized labor added almost 3.6 million members to its ranks. In fact, by 1937 membership reached 5.8 million, exceeding the peak of 1920 [also a period of great expanse of industrial unionism]. Unionization of

the labor force rose from 5.4 in 1933 to 11.5 per cent in 1939, and among non-agricultural employees from 11.8 to 20.7 per cent. Significantly, too, union membership ran counter to a major cyclical decline in 1937-1938. On an annual basis, non-agricultural employment fell by less than six per cent, but membership climbed by more than five per cent during that recession.⁵

The following figures reveal both the absolute and the relative growth:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of union members</u>	<u>Percentage of work force</u>
1930	3,632,000	11.7
1935	3,728,000	13.4
1940	8,944,000	27.2
1945	14,796,000	35.8
1950	15,000,000	31.9
1955	17,749,000	33.6 <u>6/</u>

Of the total number of union members in 1950, an estimated million to a million and a half were Black workers.

This was more than a jump in numbers: It was a shift in the nature of unionism from the rigid craft structure to industrial organization. It was part of the general democratic advances made by the American people during the Great Depression and the anti-fascist World War II.

Black workers made some progress under the impact of the New Deal and the CIO. But it was wartime industry's pressing need for workers that opened the way for many Blacks to move into industry. Under mass pressure from the Black community, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 establishing the first Fair Employment Practices Committee. Later strengthened by Executive Order 9346, the FEPC was a weak but important tool in fighting for job rights.

One of the groups that was involved in the struggle for the FEPC was the Negro Labor Victory Committee, an organization of Black unions in support of the war effort. It was founded in February, 1941, with Ferdinand Smith, secretary of the

National Maritime Union (CIO), as chairman and Ewart Guinier, of the State, County & Municipal Workers, as secretary. The Committee saw its role as largely informational: to gather news of available jobs and funnel it to the Black community through such organs as the Amsterdam News; to agitate for an FEPC; and to support victory in the war effort. The Committee did not envision itself as an organization of the mass of Black workers. It looked mainly to the people who would have information about jobs and would have influence for agitational work. Thus it sought to involve all Black union leaders, defined as officers, executive board members, and paid officials.

Its first affair was a dinner in Harlem at the Aldeen Club in April of 1941. Smith and Guinier contacted a wide variety of Black trade union leaders, even one who was secretary-treasurer of an AFL union for dredging. Nearly 100 people attended, of whom all but three were Black union leaders. At a time when Blacks were poorly represented in the leadership of unions, this was an impressive mobilization. Speakers at the dinner included Joe Curran, president of the NMU and also of the Greater New York Industrial Union Council (CIO), and Adam Clayton Powell, then a newly-elected councilman.

Out of this grew a mass meeting held at the Golden Gate Ballroom in Harlem at which Paul McNutt, chairman of the President's War Manpower Commission, spoke. There was nationwide radio coverage of his speech and Powell's introduction. McNutt had cabinet status, in effect; this was the first time a person of his stature had spoken in Harlem. The hall was so packed that Guinier himself had trouble getting in!

In 1943 and again in 1944, the Committee held a mass meeting in Madison Square Garden. So many people came that loud speakers were set up outside to enable the overflow crowd to hear. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia addressed one of the meetings.

The Committee also pushed the effort to secure a merchant ship with a Black commander, which the NMU agreed to man.

After the war, the Committee was dissolved and its members were urged to join the trade-union committee of the National Negro Congress.

The post-war period was a time of attack on the gains

workers had made during the Depression and World War II, highlighted by ideological terror and intimidation and post-war recession. The recession was first felt in the Black ghettos. Although Black workers had been able to establish a beachhead in industry during the war, it was quickly lost with the end of war production. Blacks were still lowest on the seniority lists because they were "the last hired;" standard union clauses could not prevent their being "the first fired."

The proportion of male jobs held by Negro men increased from 8.6 percent in 1940 to 9.8 percent in 1944, then fell to 8.3 percent in 1950. In 1940, Negro men held 2.8 percent of all professional and semi-professional men's jobs; by 1944 Negro men held 3.3 percent of the professional and semi-professional male jobs; but by 1950 their share had fallen to 2.6 percent, which was a lower percentage than in 1940. Negro men held 15.9 percent of the male jobs as factory operatives in 1940; but by 1950, their share had fallen to 8.5 percent. In 1944, 8.3 percent of non-whites employed outside agriculture were in transportation, communication and public utilities, sections of which were traditional strongholds of segregation. But by 1950 the percentage of the non-whites engaged in these industries had fallen to 5.9 percent, while there was no decline among whites.⁷ (Emphasis in original.)

In addition, Black people suffered from wage differentials, particularly acute for Black women, and from price differentials. Then, as now, Black people were forced to pay higher prices for inferior goods, and this was compounded by inflation and unemployment.

Accompanying the attack on civil liberties was an attack on civil rights. Black people were victims of murder and frame-ups over the country. The late 1940's and early 1950's were the time of Rosa Lee Ingram, Will McGhee, the Martinsville Seven, the Trenton Six, and others lost to history. The Black community had little political representation and throughout much of the South was denied the right to vote. Blacks suffered from separate and unequal schools, separate and unequal housing. When they lost their jobs in industry and turned

to the building trades, they faced almost insurmountable problems in apprenticeship training and upgrading.

Some looked to the union movement to solve these problems. But the union movement was a coalition for the purpose of fighting the boss, not for national liberation. And when it came to equality of treatment within the coalition for Black and white workers, there were weaknesses. There was an obvious need to struggle even within the unions for equality.

The middle class leaders of the Black freedom movement were not willing to change their pattern of work: legal fights, conferences, "winning the sympathies" of the whites. Who then would take the leadership of the struggle? Who would fight for the victims of McCarthy terror? Who would force open the job market? Who would win the vote? Who would struggle for office within the unions?

The new force that the CIO had brought into being--the trained Black organizers --was ready and willing to move, provided it was given leadership. The need for uniting the Black working class was again discussed. In 1949, Guinier, Smith, Victoria Garvin, and others who had been active in the Negro Labor Victory Committee, the trade-union committee of the National Negro Congress, and other Black workers' forms in the New York area came together in the Harlem Trade Union Council. Smith had lost his job with the union and was unemployed. He became the executive secretary of the Council. Early in its work, the HTUC still had the same attitude of a base in officialdom which had also characterized the Victory Committee. Later it was suggested that it should not be a trade union council but a labor council, with its base among all Black workers rather than just union members or officials. The HTUC's program included jobs, community service, and Black political representation. It depended on the unions for financial support.

In May, 1949, HTUC supported a demonstration for a pier of its own for the Black local of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA). Black local members took over the ILA offices. Mounted police and white ILA members sought to break up the demonstration and HTUC put up a picketline in support of the demands.

In June, 1950, HTUC became one of the sponsors of a

gathering in Chicago, called the "National Trade Union Conference for Negro Rights." That conference, which Guinier described as the last time the big white union leaders came out for Negro rights, brought together 900 unionists. Harry Bridges, of Longshore, and Maurice Travis, of Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers, among others, were there. A large number of Black delegates attended and Paul Robeson gave the main address.

Out of that conference came a Bill of Particulars and an agreement to call for the building of Negro Labor Councils across the country, to be pulled together in a national organization. The Bill of Particulars, as later recounted by William Hood of the United Automobile Workers (UAW), said:

The delegates were told that as you looked throughout the land you could see Negro men and women standing in long lines before the gates of the industrial plants for jobs, only to be told no help was wanted--while at the same time white workers were hired. Negro women are denied the right to work in the basic sections of American industry, on air lines, in the stores and other places. Those who were hired into industry in World War II have for the most part been systematically driven out--often in violation of union contracts. Vast unemployment since this war has struck the Negro community a severe blow.⁸

It went on to report the situation of Black workers with regard to upgrading, apprenticeship training, lily-white shops, government employment, the Southern economy, trade union discrimination, and civil rights. The mandate of that conference was:

"Go out and build strong the Negro Labor Councils throughout the land. Build them into instruments of democracy, equality and unity." They gave unto us the main task of fighting on that front which we know best--the economic front for jobs, upgrading, for an end to lily-white shops, for apprenticeship training, government jobs, local and state fair employment practices legislation, the non-discrimination clause in union contracts, and finally, with emphasis, the right of Negro women to work anywhere and everywhere.⁹

The two major tasks undertaken as a result of that conference were: 1) to go back to their unions and fight for model FEPC clauses in union contracts, as well as to fight on other issues, and 2) to begin to build Negro labor councils, looking toward the founding convention of a national organization.

Toward The Founding Convention

With the projection of the Founding Convention, a core of people from around the country undertook the work of building the NNLC. Their work was characterized by collectivity and by the mass leadership of each of those involved. The leaders brought much to the organization; together they developed a projection which took the struggles on the liberation front to a new level. Their rhetoric expressed the militancy and courage of the working class. Their use of culture, their respect for the heritage of Black people, and their programmatic conceptions expressed their high understanding of the history and nature of Black oppression. It is important in understanding the foundations of the NNLC to know who those people were and the ideas motivating them.

The three leading figures were William R. (Bill) Hood, recording secretary of Local 600 of the UAW-CIO; Coleman A. Young, of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (CIO); and Ernest Thompson, secretary of the Fair Practices Committee of the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (UE-CIO). They were leading figures in the labor movement generally, and among the top Black trade unionists in the country.

Bill Hood was a Black worker from Georgia. He worked in the River Rouge plant of Ford Motor Company and his Local 600 was the largest local union in the world. The plant itself had an interesting history:

In the Ford River Rouge factory ... the pattern of Negro employment was somewhat different. Negroes were heavily concentrated in foundry work, in the heat treat and paint departments, and in unskilled occupations there, as in other automobile factories. The proportion of Negroes was much higher than that

for the industry as a whole, however, and in addition Negroes were found in all departments of the plant rather than only in the traditional occupations.¹⁰

This plant was basic to the unionization of Ford and developed a tradition of militant struggle.

Hood was a courageous and outspoken union leader. From his base in the foundry (there were 20,000 foundry workers, mainly Black), he not only challenged Ford but also was outspoken in support of the Smith Act victims and other targets of political repression. He brought to the NNLC his high conception of direction for Black labor, plus power to back it.

Coleman Young, called "Big Red," was an able, quick-thinking speaker and an experienced organizer and administrator. He was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, but lived most of his life in Detroit. Among other activities, he had worked for the post office and been fired for trying to organize a union. He served in World War II as an officer in the Army Air Corps, and spent several days in the stockade for attempting to get a cup of coffee at an all-white officers' club. When he came out of service he worked again for the post office but quit because he was refused time off to work for the union, the United Public Workers. He then served as director of organization for the Wayne County CIO and later as state director of the Progressive Party. While working for the latter, he ran for the State Senate. He brought this broad organizational background to the Council.

Ernest Thompson, known as "Big Train," because he could "deliver the goods" in negotiations, had been a foundry worker in the American Radiator plant in Bayonne, New Jersey. He had led the struggle to build a union there and later to take the shop into the UE. He left the shop to become the first Black organizer for UE and later headed its Fair Practices Committee. He was a leading force in the Black caucus of that union and was the theoretician of the NNLC. It was he who wrote the original draft of the keynote address at the founding convention, as well as several other major pieces which set forth the NNLC outlook. He has been described as the "motor" of the operation. In addition to his leading theoretical role, he could travel extensively because of his job with UE and this made him indispensable for taking the word to the people.

Other leaders of importance included Victoria Garvin, then a vice-president of the Distributive, Processing & Office Workers of America (DPOWA-CIO), who became executive secretary of the Council in New York City. She went to work for the Council during preparations for the founding convention, taking charge of arrangements in Cincinnati. Born in Virginia and educated at Smith College, Garvin lost her job with the DPOWA because she carried on a struggle for the union to organize in the South and for Negro rights.

Another was Octavia Hawkins, a leader in UAW Local 453 in Chicago, who brought to the Council militancy and a broad base within her local.

Maurice Travis, a white trade unionist, was executive secretary of the Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers, a union that carried on militant struggles for the rights of miners throughout the South. Travis had lost an eye in a shoot-out with the Ku Klux Klan while defending the union in Alabama.

Thompson undertook main responsibility for the organizational work leading up to the founding convention. He traveled to key cities, met with workers, and convinced them of the need for the NNLC. From these areas--principally Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Louisville, Winston-Salem, and Durham--local leaders spread the word and work of the NNLC, meeting with other chapters to help them get started. Some of those involved in this work were: Dave Moore and Joe Morgan, UAW, Detroit; Cleveland Robinson, Local 65, Retail, Wholesale & Department Store Union, New York; Joe Johnson, treasurer of Marine Cooks & Stewards, and Revels Cayton, International Longshoremen's Union (ILWU), on the West Coast; Asbury Howard, Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers, Alabama; Sterling Neal, UE, Louisville; Viola Brown, Food & Tobacco Workers, Tri-State Area; and Bert Washington, United Public Workers, Cleveland.

Leaders in the Detroit-Chicago-Cleveland area met frequently in the pre-convention period to plan many aspects of the convention and to develop theoretical projections of the Council. Major issues were hotly debated for days, sometimes weeks, before a decision was made, and this added both to the tight-knit character of the organization and the theoretical development of the individuals involved.

The NNLC leaders saw the oppression of Black people as

three-fold: racial, class, and national. Because Black people had historically shared common culture, common economy, common history, they were a people and united by more than skin color; within this nation there were all classes, although most Blacks were workers. As a nation, Black people had a right to determine for themselves whether they would remain a part of the oppressor nation or separate from it. They had the right to come together to decide matters of policy within the liberation struggle. But as workers, the NNLC leaders saw their oppression closely linked with that of all other workers in the country. Even though all classes in the Black nation were oppressed, they yet struggled among themselves for the leadership of the nation. The Black workers must therefore begin to put their imprint on the liberation struggle, as well as join with other workers to fight the bosses.

In practice, one of the key problems that had to be worked out was: What would be the relationship of the NNLC to whites?

One of the weaknesses of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was that from its inception it had been white-dominated. The policy of many Black organizations of having an "honorary" white person at conventions make a programmatic address was also unacceptable to these Black workers. They did, however, see a need for unity with white workers. Since Blacks were a minority in the country, if they were to succeed they would need the help of other groups in the population to equalize the relationship of forces. Coleman Young, speaking on this question, said:

Most of us had not had the advantage of higher education, but we could count. And we knew what 10 meant in relation to 90. And although we were proud of our prowess as Black men, we ain't never figured no 10 Black men could whip 90 white ones. And so we decided, if we're going to war, we need some help to raise that 10 to least 51.11

As another NNLC leader explained it:

We saw no contradiction in this question of having a Black organization and having unity with white people, with white workers--we saw no contradiction at all. On the one hand, we recognized the need of

Black people in Black organizations--not separate unions--but organized into groupings to plan and discuss their interests and to plan tactics of how to further them. We also recognized that oppression in the plant against Negro workers applies also to white workers and therefore you had a kind of natural alliance, if you could develop it.¹²

The task of developing coalition required struggle on two fronts: in the union and in society. As Coleman Young explained it:

We approached Cincinnati in two capacities basically, as Negroes and Black people, and as trade unionists. And we dedicated ourselves to a dual role: to bringing democracy to a trade-union movement where it was even more sadly lacking than it is today and using that trade union base to move the trade-union movement and our white allies within it into the liberation struggle for Black people, with a primary concentration on economic issues as the key.¹³

The NNLC, though not exclusively based on the trade-union movement, depended heavily on it for support. The group of left-wing unions, including UE, United Packinghouse Workers, ILWU, and Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers, were generally committed to an advanced position on the question of Black liberation. UE Local 475 in Brooklyn, for example, was outstanding in its support of the Council. Clifton Cameron, white leader of the local, had fought for Black equality within the union. During hard-pressed strikes and struggles against raiding forays, Cameron said his local found that

Negro workers were our most loyal supporters in walking picketlines and giving financial support... So in the interest of our union we had to show these workers that we meant business, rather than just talk about their rights.¹⁴

With the understanding that fighting discrimination would strengthen the very coalition that built the unions in the first

place, Local 475 moved to build the NNLC. Even workers in one mainly white shop contributed 50¢ each to send delegates to the founding convention. Cameron, Roy McLoed, and Reginald (Roy) Best, the latter a Council leader in Brooklyn, were delegates. Charles Lange and McLoed were working with shops to secure more delegates and it was estimated there would be a minimum of 13 representatives from Local 475. Cameron went on to say:

The labor movement should recognize that the Negro people face problems that go way beyond the shop. In fighting to solve these problems the Negro people are on the political side of labor. I see the Negro Labor Council as a connection between the trade unions and the 15 million Negroes. If labor joins with them, I think we can find a solution to many of the problems for which we have no answer at the present.¹⁵

Right-wing labor leaders, however, attacked the Council. Walter Reuther, then head of UAW, James Carey, president of the International Union of Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers (IUE), the AFL, and the Ohio CIO all released statements urging their members to boycott the NNLC convention. The Daily Worker reported at the time that:

The UAW's Board calls the convention a "vehicle for communist propaganda," and makes the fantastic charge that the Detroit Negro Labor Council "works against the best interest of the American people" and is increasing "inter-group tension."¹⁶

While it was apparent that the trade-union movement could be only a partial base, the leaders had hopes that the union movement would give consistent financial support, recruit members, and in other ways help the NNLC, with no strings attached. This was to prove illusory.

As the Council hammered out its policies, it came under attack from others besides the right-wing unionists. Lester Granger wrote in the Amsterdam News:

It is good that some of our influential and responsible Negro newspapers have indicated to their readers the true nature of the Cincinnati meeting. For to tell the truth the

Negro press in general has been seriously derelict in failing to put the finger on Communist movements so members of our race can make an honest choice between rascality and honest effort.¹⁷

Cincinnati was in an uproar carefully cultivated by the news media and the city fathers in advance of the convention. Jesse D. Locker, Black Cincinnati councilman, introduced a motion denouncing the convention call. It was supported by the only other Black councilman, Theodore Berry, and passed by the council unanimously.

To these attempts at intimidation the NNLC replied:

Negroes in our country are sick and tired of second-class citizenship, of getting the crumbs from the table. We are the last to be hired and the first to be fired. We work in the lowest paying, dirtiest jobs. Negro workers stand before the shopgates all across this nation, only to be told that there are jobs for whites only. In a country that proposes to export democracy all over the world, 15,000,000 Negro citizens are jimcrowed, segregated, lynched and otherwise denied the basic minimum of democratic treatment.

The Negro Labor Council has the specific objective of bringing together Negro workers, organized and unorganized, in a variety of industry, to develop programs for economic equality, to provide leadership from their ranks, and to encourage Negro workers to play a fuller role within their unions and other aspects of community life. However, we do welcome and seek membership of white workers who accept and support our program....

Let it be clear the Negro Labor Council holds industry responsible for the miserable position of Negro workers in factories, foundries, mines and offices throughout this country. In waging a struggle for better working conditions, however, we look to and approach trade unions as natural allies, for we recognize the identity of our

interest with all workers. We want to add our strength where we can within the various unions to that of all workers for a better life. We will convene our convention on October 27 with complete confidence that hundreds of thousands of workers, Negro and white, will rally to our program to make democracy work.¹⁸

Thus determined, the Council rolled on to the convention. For several months Vicki Garvin had been in Cincinnati seeking hotel space, haggling with the fire department and the city council, trying to find rooms for delegates, and space in private homes for those who could not afford hotels. One of the problems she faced was that Cincinnati was a jim crow town and there was no space for Blacks in the white hotels. Although there were several Black hotels, including some first-class ones, they did not have sufficient space for all the delegates and rooms had to be reserved there for the leadership. It was decided that delegates should write for reservations and fight the matter out when they arrived.

Fifteen thousand copies of the call were sent out. Reports of support began to come in from around the country. From the West Coast, the International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) joined the founders' list. William Chester, Northern California regional director, and Bernard Lucas, president of Local 208 in Chicago, were elected delegates. Sealers Local 2, District Councils of the UE, and locals of the United Public Workers also endorsed the convention. Al Thibodeaux, patrolman of Marine Cooks & Stewards, was elected a delegate from his union as well as from the local council of which he was chairman.¹⁹

In New York, the United Labor Action Committee officially endorsed the convention through its co-chairmen, Aaron Schneider and Leon Strauss.²⁰ Every local union in the area was circularized and some promised support or pledged to send delegates.

The UPW "announced through Ewart Guinier, its secretary-treasurer, that convention calls have been distributed to all regional officers with a request to spur actions in locals supporting the Cincinnati meeting."²¹ UPW promised to send 15 or 20 representatives and to recruit 200 Council members

by convention time. Of the importance of the convention Guinier said:

[I]t is our belief that this timely assembly of Negro and white workers is a bold and new challenge to the most flagrant injustice in American life--the persistent and calculated second class citizenship of the entire Negro people. Our convention will undoubtedly play an important²² role in helping to stem the rise of fascism.

In Chicago, the founding meeting of the local Council featured a tribute to Octavia Hawkins, a leader at UAW Local 453. Chairman Sam Parks told the 300 people present:

We need peace so we can get freedom. Three hundred years of attempting to make substantial gains by white workers at the expense of the Negro worker has not paid off and both groups today find themselves struggling for their bare existence.²³

Discussion from the floor emphasized the need for an end to the Korean War and pointed up the relationship between the attacks on civil liberties and those on civil rights. Parks declared, "There is no difference between the pattern of the grand jury in the case of Communist leaders [Smith Act trials] and the pattern of the grand jury in the Cicero case [riot which occurred when Blacks moved into all-white Chicago suburb]."²⁴

A Black steelworker speaking from the floor added, "If you fight for Negro rights today, somebody's going to come in the night and knock on your door--and you won't know whether it's the KKK or the FBI!"²⁵

The meeting took a strong stand against the Korean war and all its by-products, paid homage to Negro women workers and pointed out that too few of them "have been afforded an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership ability in our trade union movement."²⁶

That gathering built up to the mass meeting for Octavia Hawkins, "as symbolizing the role of Negro women workers and leaders in the trade-union movement and in the struggle for Negro rights." Coming from a local two-thirds of whose members worked in Cicero, she spoke on the Cicero riot and won an ovation as she called for "Fight, fight, and more fight until every Negro is free to live where he pleases, work anywhere there are job openings, walk in decency and dignity as Americans."²⁷ The meeting concluded with an announcement that the Chicago delegates--200 in all--would go to Cincinnati in a car and bus caravan with banners reading "On to Freedom, on to Cincinnati!"

Detroit's Council began a petition campaign to put FEPC on the ballot in the city election. The NAACP and other organizations joined in urging people to pressure the Common Council to approve the resolution. Though the measure was rejected by the Common Council, the collection of 40,000 signatures was a significant beginning.

As local work proceeded, the national leaders continued to put together the "battleflags" of the NNLC: its preamble, its constitution, and the keynote address.

While the organizers were dining after one Sunday meeting in Cincinnati, Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, came into the restaurant. At the CIO convention in 1950 he had made an historic speech calling for world peace and condemning the United States for pretending to love democracy while oppressing peoples all over the world.

The NNLC leaders respected his open fight for peace and asked Dr. Johnson if he would be willing to give the keynote address at their founding convention. He replied that he would be delighted, adding "if I can't make it, then you have my permission to quote any part of my speech to the CIO." Though he was unable to attend the convention, the keynote address devoted two pages to Dr. Johnson's speech, as part of NNLC's own commitment to peace.

As time grew shorter, it became clear that the workers would come, despite the fierce attempts at intimidation. Hood reported:

Negro workers from coast to coast, some in

remote towns in Mississippi, had written him expressing their determination to attend the convention... saying that "they would be in Cincinnati if they had to come in a horse and wagon." Hood said that despite a poor financial condition, "we are not turning back. We are going to Cincinnati if we have to walk there."²⁸

Coleman Young, in a last minute statement to the press, predicted that there would be over a thousand people at the convention,

for the Negro worker knows the time is now... He wants to exercise his powerful force and accept leadership in a struggle that will stop at nothing less than full freedom.²⁹

Walking or riding, the delegates did come. Up to the last minute it was a question whether the white hotels would honor the reservations of Black trade unionists. But somehow, with 1,100 militant Black and white workers coming into town, Jim Crow went out of town for the weekend.

Founding Convention

The convention opened at noon on October 27, 1951, with the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner" and the Negro National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Vicki Garvin, who spoke first, described the troubles which had been met in preparing for the convention:

Our presence here today records still another victory-- concrete proof that despite pressure and hysteria the Negro people will remain firm and support genuine struggles for progress. We are indebted to the several Negro ministers, professionals, business men and women, including the management of the Manse Hotel for their encouragement and cooperation. I am especially proud

of the hundreds of Negro families in Cincinnati who rejected the red-baiting and opened their homes and hearts to all of us when the white hotels refused us accommodations. These working men and women responded immediately to a mere postcard or telephone call when we told them of our plight. My people would not see us on the streets. Their steadfastness, combined with our unity and strength, had such impact that it made possible the subsequent blow to white supremacy--our last minute breakthrough, interracial, in the major white hotels... 30.

"Big Train" Thompson followed. To him fell the honor of introducing Hood:

We say something new is happening. It gets to your bones; it's on the breezes; it's everywhere. What is it? It's a new wind of freedom blowing from the Seven Seas and touching the hearts of men and women... This new wind has brought on the scene a new Negro, the sons and daughters of labor. They have come with one song in their hearts--the song of Freedom.³¹

Feeling that his own words were inadequate to express the meaning of the new Negro, he called on the poets to "bring him on the scene." He quoted Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Frederick Douglass" and took poetic license with Du Bois to say:

Out of the darkness and out of the night
The Black man crawls to the dawn of light,
Beaten by lashes and bound by chains,
Searching, seeking for the Freedom Train.³²

"Jolting Joe" Johnson, a big dockworker from the West Coast, jumped up and cried out, "Great God Almighty!" Excitement gripped the crowd and Hood, seated behind Thompson on the speakers' platform, whispered to him, "Get me ready, Daddy, get me ready!" Thompson continued with Sterling Brown's "Strong Men:"³³

They bought off some of your leaders
You stumbled, as blind men will...

They coaxed you, unwontedly soft-voiced...
You followed a way.
Then laughed as usual.
They heard the laugh and wondered;
Uncomfortable;
unadmitting a deeper terror...

One thing they cannot prohibit--
The strong men ... coming on
The strong men gittin' stronger.
Strong men...
Stronger...

He concluded:

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to present the symbol of this new Negro, this symbol of a fighter for freedom, for unity, a leader of our Council and a leader of the largest local union in America. Somebody said, "I saw in the paper the other day that this guy don't speak for them, the leaders of their particular union." I'd like to say like Langston Hughes's Simple said, "He sure speaks for us," and in the words of Simple, "he's here to speak his mind."34

Hood opened by saying:

Brothers and Sisters: This is an historic day. On this day, we the delegated representatives of thousands of workers, Black and white, dedicate ourselves to the search for a new North Star... We come conscious of the new stage in the Negro people's surge toward freedom. We come to announce to all America and to the world that Uncle Tom is dead. "Old Massa" lies sleeping in the cold, cold grave. Something new is cooking on the Freedom Train...

No meeting held anywhere in America at this mid-century point in world history can be more important nor hold more promise for the bright future toward which humanity strives than this convention of our

great National Negro Labor Council. For here we have gathered this basic force of human progress: the black sons and daughters of labor and our democratic white brothers and sisters whose increasing concern for democracy, equality and peace is America's bright hope for tomorrow.³⁵

This speech, which set forth the political and programmatic outlook of the Negro Labor Council, is the single most important document of that organization and one of the most important ever produced by Black workers in the United States.

Hood continued:

The Negro Labor Council is our symbol, the medium of expression of our aims and aspirations. It is the expression of our desire and determination to bring to bear our full weight to help win first class citizenship for every Black man, woman and child in America. We say that these are legitimate aims. We say that these aspirations burn fiercely in the breast of the Negro in America. And we further say that millions of white workers echo our demands for freedom. These white workers recognize in the struggle for Negro rights, the prerequisites of their own aspirations for a full life and a guarantee that the rising tide of fascism will not engulf America.³⁶

He reviewed the decisions of the Chicago Trade Union Conference and discussed the need for economic and social advancement. He asked:

Is there any wonder, then, that this great Chicago gathering of the Black working sons and daughters of our land said that their oppression can no longer exist in our America? ... They said to us: "Go out and build strong the Negro Labor Councils throughout the land. Build them into instruments of democracy, equality and unity."

They gave unto us the main task of fighting on that front which we know best--the economic front...³⁷

The mandate he brought was to build an organization of Black workers, men and women, united with white workers willing to accept and support their program. The organization was not to compete with existing organizations of the Black people, but rather to be a movement of a new type, a movement that could "chart the course ahead to help the whole Negro people and their sincere allies." It would bring together the strength of the Black workers to lead the freedom struggle "to the end that you will have economic, political, and social equality, so that you might enjoy the great and good things of our land."

The forceful expression of the right of Black people to determine for themselves how they would struggle for freedom was one of the outstanding features of the keynote:

We wish to say further that the day has ended when white trade-union leaders or white leaders in any organization may presume to tell Negroes on what basis they shall come together to fight for their rights. Three hundred years has been enough of that. We Black people in America ask for your cooperation--but we do not ask for your permission!³⁸

At that, a thousand people rose in an ovation.

It was not a policy of separatism. Hood over and over spoke of the strength lying in the unity of Black and white:

If 15 million Negroes, led by their alert sons and daughters of labor, and united together and joined by the 15 million organized white workers in the great American labor movement, say there shall be no more Jim Crow in America--then there will be no more Jim Crow!³⁹

But that kind of unity could not come from a blind acceptance of the leading role of whites. The Black people, particularly the "sons and daughters of labor," must be ready to act as America's conscience. "The Negro Labor Council ... has come into being at a time when democracy needs fearless champions."⁴⁰

Neither, said Hood, did he see the movement in terms of a narrow struggle in the United States; rather, he linked it with the aspirations of colonial peoples around the world, quoting

from Dr. Johnson's speech:

If we look at ourselves in the way that history shows it to us, we are probably the most ruthless dominators and exploiters and humiliators of human life that ever spanned the pages of history. For all of a hundred years now, we have had in our hands scientific and technical intelligence, the most creative weapon of economic and political constructiveness that ever came into the hand of man. We have shown what we could do with that weapon by building up the great economic and political structure of the United States and Britain, France, Germany and Japan. But in 200 years, while we have had it in our power to build up likewise the economic and political freedom of India, Africa, China, Malaya, Indo-China and the peoples of the Near East, we not only have not done so, but we have used that very power to conquer them in war, to dominate them politically, to exploit their natural resources and their labor, and to segregate and humiliate them upon the land upon which their fathers have died and in the presence of the graves which hold the bodies of their mothers.⁴¹

Hood closed by saying that none of these objectives would come without struggle. The immediate program he proposed was a national mass campaign for an FEPC. He called on all those present to take the Council's constitution, preamble and other documents into battle as "battleflags," to make them living documents. He concluded:

We move on, united--and neither man nor beast will turn us back. We will achieve in our time, for ourselves and for our children, a world of no Jim Crow, of no more "white men's jobs" and "colored only" schools; a world of freedom, full equality, security and peace. Our task is clearly set forth. Brothers and sisters, we move on to struggle and to victory!⁴²

The morning session closed with a sustained ovation.

Important aspects of the program were amplified in the sessions that followed. Viola Brown reported on Black oppression in the South.

Let no one be fooled. The fact that the thirteen Southern states are under the political and economic control of the huge Wall Street monopolies allied with the Southern landlord reaction is a serious threat to the entire labor movement... There will be no security for anyone, nor any civil rights, nor any real right and ability to organize anywhere in the country as long as millions of Southern workers remain unorganized and especially while nine million Southern Negroes suffer under special Jim Crow oppression.⁴³

She talked about the struggles of Black workers in the South, giving an example of the tobacco workers in Eastern North Carolina, who did seasonal, unorganized work in the plants. They succeeded, in spite of union-busting and red-baiting, in organizing a union. The bosses then mechanized the plant, throwing the Black workers out of jobs. The union was crushed under the onslaught of McCarthyism. Thus, the Black workers were unemployed and the white workers were still unprotected and suffering from the Southern differential. The answer, she said, was united action:

We in the South think that organized workers in this country must join with the worker in the South and accept their fair share of the responsibility for beating back the forces of reaction on the unorganized Southern front... We need not continue to be driven back wards in the South. We need not let the South remain an unorganized base for us and an organized base for reaction and fascism. We in the South believe that a turn can be made... if, together, we see that a turn must be made... and if together, North and South, we begin to make it.⁴⁴ (Emphasis in original.)

That evening there was a cultural presentation and Paul Robeson spoke and sang. He called on the delegates to:

[Go] into the Negro communities to win great sections, millions to the side of the common working class people for dignity and for a decent life. I can't tell you how proud I am to be with you tonight and to wish you well. To forge this unity deep, so deep that nothing can ever even touch it a little bit, let alone any chance of breaking it. I have great confidence in these, in the working-class movement of America, white and Black, to see that somewhere in our time, this, our time, we shall so labor that our children and their children shall work an American earth that we can know and be proud is a democratic earth that we have helped to build.⁴⁵ (Emphasis in original.)

The delegates spontaneously burst into song: "Robeson is our leader, we shall not be moved!"

Maurice Travis, of the Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers, laid out a new line for the relationship of white workers to Black workers.

I didn't come here to tell the Negro workers of America, or their leaders, what to do. I didn't come to orate about the problems of the Negro people and hand out a fancy custom-built set of answers designed to wash away all problems--like Tide, the Washday Wonder... What I've got to say is aimed at the white trade unionists...⁴⁶

He pointed out that, although the progress of white and Black were bound together, most white trade union leaders had done nothing to fight for Negro rights. He stressed that white unionists had a responsibility to fight as trade unionists for the rights of Black workers as trade unionists. "More than that," he said, "it's a matter of cold self-interest, self-preservation of themselves and their unions for them to press that fight just as hard as they can. I have been trying to say that when white workers join in campaigns for the liberation of their fellow freedom-fighters, the white workers are helping themselves."⁴⁷

He called on white trade unionists to fight that the three

basic tools of struggle were put into the hands of the Black workers: jobs, full membership in a trade union, and the right to advance into positions of leadership in the union. With these tools, the Black worker would be able to mow down the barriers in his path. Travis offered the challenge to white workers that:

The white workers who are here at this conference have a special responsibility. They have the job of going back to their homes, to their unions, and campaigning for Negro-white unity--not among the Negro workers--but among the white workers.⁴⁸

He finished by saying:

This is a time for new John Browns to arise, up and down the land. And I am convinced that out of this conference will come a whole army of John Browns. Men who are dedicated not to talk and double talk, but to action. Men of principle and of conscience who are convinced that Jim Crow can be licked, and the time has come to lick it, so that the Negro can take his full and rightful place as first class citizen of this land--with full social, economic, political and civil rights. The time is ripe. Let's go.⁴⁹

The discussion of the rights of Black women was also a highlight of the panel sessions. One after another, delegates spoke to the question, calling on the NNLC to take seriously the issue of women's rights and to raise the struggle to a new level. Black women, they said, are at the bottom of the economic ladder and a fight must be conducted to improve their conditions, whether domestic workers or production workers. They must have the right to work anywhere and everywhere.

The last speaker stated:

The Negro women are on the offensive. And that means we're plowing through. It means if we're on that other seat on the Freedom Train, driving when that other man goes to sleep, we'll be awake still going through... I think we understand it so well, this role of action for

Negro women, because the Negro women are so much oppressed, more than all the other people in the whole country. And so I take great pleasure in reading this resolution...

The resolution detailed the super-exploitation of Black women and called on the union movement to accept the challenge:

To win job opportunities for Negro women throughout industry, in offices, department stores, public utilities, air lines, etc.

To support the organization of domestic workers, both in the North and South, and for improvement of their working conditions.

For job training and upgrading, especially for Negro women and youth.

The right to play a leadership role in government, industry and the unions, based on demonstrated ability and willingness to give leadership in family and other struggles.

The resolution was adopted enthusiastically.

Among other resolutions adopted was a "Program of Action," which called for:

The fight for 100,000 jobs in areas of employment currently barred to Negroes;

The fight for jobs for Negro women;

The fight for a National FEPC (one million signatures);

The fight for a model FEP clause in each union contract;

The fight for full freedom.⁵¹

Another monumental event at the meeting was the adoption

of "A Declaration of Principles by White Delegates," which was signed by most of the whites present and was patterned after Travis's speech.

Ernest Thompson later described the convention as "the most exciting" of his life; Ewart Guinier said it was "the most hopeful." Delegates remembering it after 20 years could recite sections of Hood's speech or recall especially moving moments. A policeman sent to guard Hood and Robeson stood staunchly by them, and when Robeson spoke, he cheered and wept. A Cincinnati man came to see what a "subversive meeting" was like. He met an old war buddy and stayed. At the end he said, "I thought from what I read in the paper this was going to be a subversive meeting. I did not expect it to be like this. I'll say now that if nobody else tries to build a Negro Labor Council in Cincinnati, I am going to build one here myself."⁵²

Reporters arriving hostile remained to clap and cheer. When resolutions were presented, a resounding "Aye" came from the press table, and the reports which they sent out, even in the Cincinnati Enquirer, were factual and fair.

Before your eyes in Cincinnati, we witnessed the transformation of the Underground Railroad into the Freedom Train. The Negro workers--the "sons and daughters of labor"--were at the throttle with the slogan on their lips: "You can't derail the Freedom Train!"⁵³

There were 1,052 people registered, including 898 regular delegates and 154 official observers. Some 200 others participated. More than 15 international unions were represented, including UAW, MMSW, DPOWA, ILWU, UPW, United Steel Workers, United Rubber Workers, UE and other CIO unions, and various AFL unions. Delegates came from 22 states, including nine Southern ones. One-third of the delegates were women; four-fifths of all delegates were Black.⁵⁴ It was reported to the convention that 23 Councils were organized or in process of being organized.

Perhaps the best summary of the meaning of the convention can be found in the words of a Black worker who was there:

This convention has started something new cooking on the Freedom Train. Wherever any of the Detroit

delegates go they are constantly asked: What about Cincinnati? Is it really true that a new organization has been born that will definitely bring freedom to the Negroes? In answer to these questions we proudly reply, "Brother, you'd better hitch on. This train is geared for full speed ahead!"⁵⁴

Repression

While thousands of workers greeted the NNLC with joy, the ruling class and its lieutenants in the labor movement sought to undermine and destroy it.

The first indication of the impact of the NNLC's founding convention was the 1951 CIO convention. It had fewer than 10 Black delegates out of 539, and none of those attacked the NNLC, as the bureaucrats had expected them to do. Direct reference was made to the NNLC by Albin B. Hartnett, white secretary-treasurer of the IUE, who regretted that "communists could get such a following."

The guest speaker at the convention, Lester B. Granger of the Urban League (and a columnist for the Amsterdam News), slandered the NNLC, saying that it was misleading the Black workers. But James Carey and Walter Reuther, who had attacked NNLC before its founding, did not repeat their attacks.⁵⁵

Carey, who was IUE president, later accused the Council of carrying out the foreign policy of the USSR. To that Hood replied:

It is significant that Brother Carey sees nothing jim crow in the all-white executive board of nearly every CIO international. He does not attack the leadership of the CIO Textile Workers Union for coddling Ku Kluxers. But he denounces the organization of the Negro people in the name of opposing jim crow.⁵⁶

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) also took an interest in the Council and subpoenaed Hood and Young for hearings in Detroit. Beginning in October it had "stool pigeons" investigating the activities of Local 600, Hood and

others. In February, 1952, the Committee itself arrived. The main targets of its attack were Local 600, the NNLC, the foreign-born, and the Civil Rights Congress. Its aim was destruction of the unity of the working people, and specifically those groups which sought to promote that unity.

Five Black leaders were subpoenaed--The Reverend Charles A. Hill, a community leader, Hood, Young, Arthur McPhaul, leader of the CRC in Michigan, and Lebron Simmons, an attorney. Pat Rice, vice-president of Local 600, was among others subpoenaed.

The men HUAC had summoned in Detroit were mass leaders of the Black and white working class. They responded militantly to attempts at intimidation; they had seen worse on the picket-line and at negotiating tables. Their spirit was reflected by Hood, who said:

I dare them to put me on the witness stand. I am from Georgia, the same state as the chairman of the un-American Committee, Congressman Wood. I will tell him what I suffered in Georgia--what I saw when I was a young man and which still exists there.⁵⁷

The subpoenaed men fought back. Organizations banded together to hold mass support rallies and picket the hearings. UAW, the Baptist Ministerial Alliance, the Wolverine Bar Association, the DeSoto local of UAW, the NNLC, the Michigan Peace Council, and Local 600 joined the protests. People packed the rallies to hear Hood and others assail the Committee.

The hearings were broadcast over the radio. Young, who was to take the stand first, agreed with his lawyer, George Crockett, that he would first plead the First and Fifth Amendments and then "tell the Committee where to go." He took the offensive from the outset. When the HUAC lawyer said, "You told us you were the executive secretary of the National Negro Congress--" Young told him, "That word is 'Negro,' not 'Nigra.'"

Tavener replied, "I said, 'Negro.' I think you are mistaken."

"I hope I am," said Young. "Speak more clearly."

Having seized the offensive, Young held the hearing to the points he wanted to discuss. He refused to talk about any

organization other than the NNLC, and in particular refused to discuss the National Negro Congress, which had been labeled subversive by HUAC. He talked about the work of the NNLC; he continually raised the point that it was not the Communists but the Committee that was un-American.

The Congressmen found Young's calm self-assurance and ready wit hard to take, as in the following exchange, which left one Congressman (Jackson) livid:

Mr. Jackson: You said that there is a whole lot wrong with all the world.

Mr. Young: I am interested in the United States and not the whole world.

Mr. Jackson: Let us not lose freedom --

Mr. Young: That is the point, Mr. Jackson, I am fighting for freedom myself.

Mr. Jackson: So am I. Let us not lose individual freedom and human dignity by sacrificing it to an order of things which has filled concentration camps to overflowing. If you think of the lot of the Negro who have in eighty-some-odd years come forward to a much better position --

Mr. Young: Mr. Jackson, we are not going to wait 80 more years, I will tell you that.

Mr. Jackson: Neither are the Communists. They say they are going to overthrow the government by force and violence and effect all the changes immediately.

Mr. Young: If you are telling me to wait 80 years, I will tell you I am not prepared to wait and neither are the Negroes.

Mr. Jackson: Neither is the Communist Party.

Mr. Young: I am speaking for the Negro people and for myself. Are you speaking for the Communist Party?⁵⁸

Young hammered away at the oppression of the Black people and his commitment to fighting that oppression, on the one hand, and on the other the role of the Committee in unleashing hysteria while "the real un-Americans," the Klan and others, were allowed to go unhindered.

Congressman, I can assure you I have had no part in the hanging or bombing of Negroes in the South. I have not been responsible for firing a person from his job for what I think are his beliefs, or what somebody thinks he believes in, and things of that sort. That is the hysteria that has been swept up by this committee.⁵⁹

Young's testimony closed with a short exchange on defense of the United States:

I am a part of the Negro people. I fought in the last war and I would unhesitatingly take up arms against anybody that attacks this country. In the same manner I am now in process of fighting against what I consider to be attacks and discrimination against my people. I am fighting against un-American activities such as lynchings and denial of the vote. I am dedicated to that fight, and I don't think I have to apologize or explain it to anybody, my position on that.⁶⁰

The testimony of Hood and the Reverend Mr. Hill followed the tactic of denouncing the work of HUAC while refusing to answer questions. As the hearings went out over the radio, many in the Black community took delight in knowing their rights and their race were being defended before the witch-hunters.

One minister, however, frightened by the action of the Reverend Mr. Hill, sent a message to the Committee:

The disparaging remarks expressed yesterday by a clergyman before the Un-American Activities Committee makes imperative a statement by a minister of the Gospel of Christ, of the true feelings of the Negro religious community regarding communism...

The Negro disapproves any feeling for communism. He is looking forward to the realization of the American goal and dream, the family of strong brothers, friendly neighbors working together for a real democracy under God.⁶¹

But, according to Young, the picketlines and mass meetings had more impact, and the Committee left in a shambles. It was perhaps a turning point in the McCarthy terror.

On another front, some CIO leaders had taken steps to capture the initiative from the NNLC in the jobs fight. Carey and others sponsored a National Negro Labor Conference and set up a National Negro Labor Committee. The conference was held in the Hotel Theresa on March 1, 1952. In sharp contrast to the founding convention of NNLC, Carey and Charles Zimmerman, vice-president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, gave speeches in addition to those by Black leaders, A. Philip Randolph, UN delegate Tobias Channing and Willard Townsend, president of the Transport Service Employees. Greetings sent by the NNLC were not read; those from Governor Thomas E. Dewey, President Harry S. Truman, were.

Zimmerman was irked at the idea of there being "Negro dressmakers;" according to him, there were only "dressmakers" in his union, there was no Negro question, and "we do not recognize it."⁶³ Carey told the conference that Negroes are "individuals" and did not deserve or want "special interest or consideration."⁶⁴

Commented reporter Abner Berry of The Daily Worker:

Now what is Carey saying? Carey is declaring here that he is not going to fight for Negro rights, for in order to really fight for the rights of Negroes, he would have to recognize Negroes not just as individuals, but as a people who face national oppression.⁶⁵

The conference decisions called for:

A civil rights program, including a federal anti-lynching bill, FEPC legislation, abolition of the poll tax and the Senate filibuster;

Establishment of a National Negro Labor Committee with branches in any city where requests come from [right-wing] trade union leaders;

Developing community activity by unions in all Negro communities, aid Negro workers in getting apprenticeship training, and in organizing Southern Negro workers, and the democratic unions of the West Indies, Central America and Africa;

Combat "communism" and the National Negro Labor Council.⁶⁶

The weakness of the conference was that the last point was the key point. The meeting was taped for Voice of America broadcasts.

100,000 Jobs

A week after the National Negro Labor Conference, the NNLC of Greater New York held a meeting--also at the Hotel Theresa and also on the subject of jobs. It was called a "Job Action Conference." There were no greetings from the President of the United States or the Governor of New York, but there were 250 unionists who mapped a campaign of serious struggle. There were reports on the building trades, printing, food, railroads, utilities, and other industries. Rudy Christensen, chairman of the Jobs in Industry Committee, reported 250 jobs had been won and he outlined the future struggles.

An immediate victory following this conference was the receipt by Christensen of a letter from William I. Wells, public relations manager for Safeway Stores, saying, "Equal opportunity will be given each qualified applicant."

In this campaign the Council worked with the West Side FEP Committee, a community organization which described its work as 90% action and 10% talk.⁶⁷

In Chicago, the West Side NLC went into action with a drive to break discrimination in stores along Madison Street.

where there were many Black shoppers but few Black clerks. The campaign opened at Butler Brothers retail store. A delegation of union members and community people also met with the management of Scott stores and Ben Franklin stores, chains in the area. Black women working there were segregated in stockroom or food counter work. The Woolworth and Scott stores became the main targets, with the manager at Woolworth's swearing he would not hire Black saleswomen "until hell freezes over."

Hell didn't freeze over, but the NLC did set up picketlines which caused business to fall off as much as 85%. Members and non-members alike supported the campaign, urging shoppers, "Don't spend your money where you can't work!"

By August, certain of the stores capitulated, including Maybrook Clothing Store and Tobias Men's Wear. An alliance was developed in the community of civic, church, and women's groups to carry the weight of the effort. As Earl Abel of UAW Local 453 explained, "It was the solidarity of the people that won these victories. There are new faces at every picketline, new members of the Council at every meeting."⁶⁸

Woolworth's finally gave up in November and hired two Black sales people. Their trade, which was largely Black, had fallen off by 90%.

By June, 1953, most of the Madison Street stores had conceded. Scott's had hired 10 Blacks, and Woolworth then had 14 Black employees out of 22. At a tea attended by 300 people and backed by 14 cooperating organizations, the NNLC celebrated--and the Scott and Woolworth managers showed up to join in the party!⁶⁹

Struggle opened early on the West Coast with a brilliant victory in California's East Bay. There, for years, the Key System Transit Lines, the local transport monopoly, had refused to hire Black workers. The NAACP in 1940 had started a campaign in which other organizations joined and which peaked around 1944 with the Bay Area Council Against Discrimination and the Committee for Better Transportation. Delegations and petitions urged immediate hiring of Blacks but met a cold and firm refusal by the Key System, which claimed it hired solely on the basis of qualifications.

In 1949, the Urban League took up the fight. In 1951, the

newly formed NLC came into the fray, at a time when the Key System was using the false excuse of "not enough qualified drivers" to ask for a cutback in service. NLC pointed out there was no shortage except for the company's refusal to use Black drivers. NLC took the issue to the community through mass meetings and distribution of 15,000 leaflets sharply titled, "Is the Key System Lying or Joking?"⁷⁰ As the Council reported:

The NLC pointed out that the Key System refused to hire Negroes and the Mutual harm and disservice to the Negroes and white low income groups resulting from this policy. We also urged people to call, write or visit the personnel manager protesting his jim crow policy. The time was ripe, the issue was hot, and the people responded. Then the Key System was beaten. People were happy to see first one, three, five, ten, twelve brown smiling faces of the Negro drivers manning the Key System busses.⁷¹

Of the Southern Councils, the Louisville Area Council was outstanding. General Electric was planning to move all its appliance manufacturing to Louisville to a new plant complex called "Appliance Park," at that time the largest of its kind in the world. It would eventually hire 16,000 workers. Feeling that Black workers should have a fair share of the jobs that would open, the Louisville NLC sought to prepare the workers. Their first campaign was a successful struggle with the Board of Education to train Black people for jobs. The classes involved 400 people and lasted from 30 to 90 days. They were taught by Louisville teachers and shop workers, according to specifications which UE gathered from craftsmen around the country in GE shops. From the beginning NNLC involved a broad cross-section of the community, including union and church groups, the NAACP, and the Urban League. This laid the basis for the "Gateway Campaign," one of the most significant of the NLC campaigns, which is more fully discussed below.

One of the most important aspects of the NNLC's work was its emphasis on equal rights for Black women. As shown at the convention, the Black woman was at the bottom of the economic ladder. The Black man could not advance as long as she was kept down. This had to become a focus of the work of the Council.

Campaigns were begun in areas where women were a major part of the work force. This was true, for example, at the Tri-State Council's work with R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company to end discriminatory hiring and on-the-job practices. It was also true of the efforts to open up sales jobs. Women were brought into leadership at all levels of the Council, from vice-presidents of the national organization to local presidents and executive board members. There were special functions to mark the role played by women, such as the mass meeting to honor Octavia Hawkins held in Chicago.

There were a series of conferences on "Job Rights for Negro Women," notably in Chicago and Los Angeles. As the call to the Chicago conference announced,

[The Black woman] is chained to the lower rungs of the job ladder, forcibly prevented from advancing to jobs of higher skills and pay for performing the same work as white men and women... The gains of labor cannot be made secure unless the rights of Negro women are won. The fight of the Negro people for their complete equality cannot be achieved unless Negro women are freed to participate fully in the struggle.⁷²

That conference was held on March 16, 1952, at the Packing-house Workers' Center, with Octavia Hawkins presiding. Two hundred and twenty-five delegates and observers came from organizations throughout Chicago to map a battle plan. Sears, Roebuck & Co. and the meatpacking corporations--Armour, Swift, and Wilson--were named as main targets, but there was discussion of the situation faced by women in factories, the school system, and other areas. Jack Burch of UE reported on the responsibility of organized labor in the fight.⁷³

At the Los Angeles meeting, Viola Brown spoke on the need for an intensified effort to end the triple oppression of Black women. The 150 delegates and observers adopted a program to:

Intensify the "Jobs for Negro Women" campaign at Hoffman Radio Co.

Spur union campaigns at unorganized shops in the garment industry, where Negro and Mexican

women workers predominate.

Aid in guaranteeing formation of the independent domestic workers' union.⁷⁴

Sears, Roebuck & Co.

Sears had an ironclad policy of discrimination against Blacks as sales personnel in its 674 retail stores, although as one store put it they had had "several excellent Negro maids and cleaning women ... for many years and [they] had been treated very well." The company never considered upgrading them to decent or dignified jobs.⁷⁵

NNLC undertook this fight as one of its first national efforts. Struggles were mounted in various cities. The first breakthrough came in San Francisco early in 1952, and the local chapter reported to the second convention that:

The national campaign of our Council against jim crow hiring policies of Sears Roebuck was successfully spearheaded in this city where the first breakthrough occurred. After a vigorous three-week campaign the store hired 14 Negro women as clerks and cashiers for the first time in their history.⁷⁶

Other Councils demanded of Sears that it reverse its jim crow employment policies. Picketlines were mounted in Cleveland, Detroit, Newark, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Chicago.

The successful Cleveland campaign pointed up the elements that were combined in winning the job fights, particularly Sears, all over the country. The Sears store they were dealing with was near the heart of the Black ghetto, at a busy intersection. The NLC began by writing a letter to the company on May 2, 1952, demanding a statement of Sears' hiring policy and employment practices. A second letter two weeks later demanded an interview. To this meeting went a committee of Black and white Council members, including the chairman, Bert Washington, and the executive secretary, Ethel Goodman.

Sears denied there was any segregation, saying that no qualified person had ever applied and refusing to give any special attention to the "victims of jim crow." "We accept applications from Negroes and place them where they are 'best qualified' to serve us and this we will continue to do," was the final position of the Sears management.⁷⁷

The Cleveland NLC executive board and its jobs committee then drew up a plan of action, agreeing that the first step was to publicize the interview and the second step was to pull together organizational support from the community for the demand that Black women be hired as sales people and office workers. The third step was to organize the kind of demonstration in which broad sections of the community would participate.

A news release was issued (carried, however, only by the Black press) and leaflets were distributed. A mailing was sent to trade unions, the NAACP, the Urban League, and church and ministerial groups asking that they support the demands, whether or not they supported the NLC. The response was greater than anticipated; even white patrons and workers at Sears expressed sympathy with the campaign. Yet, despite letters and telegrams which poured into the store, there was no response from Sears.

On August 29, the jobs committee set September 15 as the date for a demonstration at Sears, initiating two weeks of activity. This was announced in the churches and in a leaflet distributed at Sears asking, "Which Side Are You On?" Shoppers were handed 20,000 copies of the flyer, which asked them not to cross the picketline. The watchword was, "Time for Action Now!" Signs, leaflets, picket captains were all in readiness for the big day, in spite of threats that "The KKK will be there to take care of you."

On September 12, Sears began to move. It called the Urban League and asked them to head off the demonstration, promising a conference later. The Urban League refused to intercede. Sears then contacted the Reverend Luther Hill, secretary of the Civic Committee, and asked him to relay the company's offer to the Council. He agreed, although he made it clear that he supported the position of the local NLC. To the offer of a meeting "later,"

The Council chairman replied that the Council was ready to meet and confer with the company any time,

but that the time had passed for talking alone. If such a conference as proposed by the company could be arranged for Monday, before the picketline was scheduled to begin, and agreement was reached in such a conference, then, and only then, would the picketing operation be called off.⁷⁸

Sears protested but had no choice and agreed to meet. Out of that meeting came an agreement to hire two women who would be referred by the Urban League. Sears also agreed to a continuing policy of employment and training of Negro applicants who would be referred by the Council, Urban League, and Baptist Ministerial Conference, all of whom were represented at the meeting.

The careful preparatory work of the Council in uniting the community before going into the struggle was significant in the victory. One of the products of this care was that other groups recognized the militancy and leadership of the Council: the Baptists, for example, gave credit to the NLC in their "family organ."

A press account of this incident concluded:

Whether the walls of jim crow will fall before the people, led by the National Negro Labor Council, begin to march, or after seven times seven days, or weeks, or months, they will fall in this and in other even more basic industries as the wrath of the people mounts and their determination and impatience for freedom grows stronger.⁷⁹

The Sears campaign was continued after the second convention. In December, the NNLC announced simultaneous picketlines in 23 selected areas across the country. The Council sent a letter to General Robert E. Wood, Sears board chairman, describing the convention mandate to end the "jim crow hiring policies of Sears Roebuck." Hood said of the campaign,

The National Negro Labor Council is now entering its second year of struggle for the full freedom of the Negro people of America. In the past year we have made great strides, and scored significant

victories, toward the fulfillment of our immediate goal, "100,000 jobs for Negro workers in areas of employment from which they are at present excluded."

In the year ahead we have set for ourselves four national objectives: to crack jim crow hiring in Sears Roebuck and American Airlines, the fight for national and local FEPC; and the opening of a campaign to stop the systematic elimination of Negroes from employment in the railroad industry.

The Christmas picketline is only the opening gun... It is significant that this is the first time that national coordinated picketing has been conducted in protest against undemocratic hiring policies.⁸⁰

By the end of 1953, practically all of Sears outlets outside the deep South had come to terms. Only in Chicago, "main bastion and national headquarters of the Sears empire," did those policies continue in full force. Finally, in the summer of 1954, under pressure from NNLC and other organizations, the home office agreed--if reluctantly--to hire Blacks.

In 1956, NNLC summed up this campaign.

Thus, in a jobs campaign stretching from one end of the nation to the other, and lasting for more than two years, the National Negro Labor Council became the first organization to break down the bias-encrusted employment policies of a major business on a national scale.

The NNLC, however, makes no attempt to lay exclusive claim to this significant victory for democracy and Negro rights. Due credit must go to the hundreds of other organizations and church groups who participated in one or another aspect of this campaign in various cities and without whose cooperation victory could not have been won.⁸¹

Fair Employment Practices

The letters "FEPC," standing for "Fair Employment Practices Committee," came to be symbolic to many Americans in the 1940's and 50's of the legal right of all people to work wherever there were job openings, and to be trained for any job that existed. The struggle for a national FEPC with teeth--that is, able to enforce legislation on the books--began in 1940 with the mobilization for war production.

With huge outpourings of money into defense industry, the depression finally began to end for white workers, though not for Blacks and other minorities.

It has become axiomatic that Negroes lose ground faster than other groups in periods of depression and gain more slowly in boom periods. As could be expected the Negro lagged behind in recovering from the last depression. In April 1941 Negroes constituted 16.3 per cent of all WPA workers and only 10.2 per cent of the total population. Only 59 per cent of all colored males, 14 years of age and over, were registered in urban areas as employed in 1940, while the corresponding proportion for urban white males was 68 per cent.⁸²

During the transition to war economy, Blacks were barred from most defense industries except as janitors, and they were barred from training programs, especially in the South.

The wartime boom and the slogans of democracy were in sharp contradiction to the situation of the Black people. Their reaction was a growing and universal anger which culminated in a call for the government to adopt standards of fair employment and enforce them. These feelings came together in a powerful movement led by A. Philip Randolph, which threatened a march on Washington on July 1, 1941.

Seeking to avert a mass descent on the Capitol in the midst of war preparations requiring fullest unity on the home-front, Roosevelt issued a letter to the co-chairmen of the Office of Production Management in which he added his weight to the campaign to break down discrimination. The president said, in part:

Our government cannot countenance continued

discrimination against American citizens in defense production. Industry must take the initiative in opening the doors of employment to all loyal and qualified workers regardless of race, creed, color or national origin.

American workers, both organized and unorganized, must be prepared to welcome the general and much-needed employment of fellow workers of all racial and nationality groups in defense industries.⁸³

This commendable plea, however, was not effective. Discrimination is not a question of moral right but of extra profits. What was needed was "teeth."

The President responded to mass pressure and on June 25, 1941, issued Executive Order 8802 establishing the first national Fair Employment Practices Committee. It was weak: its members were volunteers, it had little money, its authority was limited. Throughout its existence it was continually under attack. As expressed by the NNLC in a pamphlet entitled "The Truth About the FEPC Fight:"

Let us have no further illusions that it is just the Dixiecrats who oppose fair practice legislation. The big corporations of America do not want fair practice legislation and the politicians they control have so far made it impossible. There is an unholy alliance between the whole Southern block of Senators and Congressmen and Northern Republicans and Democratic spokesmen for big business, and you can spell it out in terms of dollars for the corporations and human suffering among the people, Black, Brown and white.⁸⁴

Helped by the pressures of the wartime coalition and the anti-fascist offensive, the Black people fought continually for the protection and extension of this limited FEPC. The result was a second, stronger Executive Order 9346 on May 27, 1943, which functioned better until it was killed by crippling Congressional amendments in 1944.

With the end of the FEPC there were immediate and significant job losses for the Black people.

In industry after industry, the limited progress made during World War II period has since been reversed. Negro workers had secured their greatest beachhead in rapidly expanding wartime industries such as shipbuilding, aircraft and ammunition. With the decline of these industries, tens of thousands of Negro wage earners were thrown on the streets at a more rapid rate than whites. The U.S. Census Bureau revealed that under the "last hired, first fired" policy which is always applied to minorities, unemployment among whites in the period from July, 1945, to April 1, 1946, increased one and one-half times, while among non-white it more than tripled.

There was an unchecked revival of discriminatory practices which remained unchanged with the re-introduction of war production during the Korean War.

The general structure of discrimination was unchallenged; that is, Black workers were uniformly excluded from skilled occupations. In 1940 their participation in skilled trades ranged from a high of 3.7% for painters and paperhangers to a low of 0.7% for machinists, millwrights and toolmakers. Black workers were still confined to the lowest paying, dirtiest jobs. Of 32 occupations in the steel industry, for example, Blacks were jam-crowded into the eight lowest paid, heaviest jobs. On the airlines they were employed only as porters. In certain industries where Blacks had traditionally been employed, such as railroads, they were now losing their jobs. The position of Black women was particularly shocking; they were seldom permitted to work as clerical or production workers; by the 1940 census, almost four-fifths of Black women workers were employed in five of the lowest paid of the 451 census job classifications. The federal government ranked high on the list of employers who discriminated.

NNLC recognized and sought to struggle on the basis that discrimination was a three-party conspiracy among the employer, the unions, and the government, with the main burden on the corporations who profited from it.

NNLC also recognized that if the unions fell into the trap of fostering the boss's policies of discrimination, all

workers suffered. The structure of discrimination in basic industry--steel, auto, rails--had to be torn down.

Thus NNLC joined the fight for national, state, and local FEPC laws with teeth and sought to bring the masses into the struggle, seeing as ineffective the current efforts by groups like the National Committee for an FEPC, an elite pressure group which worked through "leaders." That group had succeeded in involving church and fraternal groups and the NAACP, but it had not won an FEPC.

In 1951 President Truman established a President's Committee on Contract Compliance. Ewart Guinier commented that it was:

... a feeble attempt to meet the program worked out six weeks ago in Cincinnati ... for a national campaign for a genuine FEPC... We have got nothing from the Truman Order of 1948 and we will get even less from the one issued for the 1952 elections unless the Negro Labor Council and the labor movement generally join in a mass fight for a genuine FEPC, with teeth.⁸⁶

NNLC began the struggle for FEPC laws by circulating a petition in various localities. It was a major issue at the founding conventions of several chapters. The petition read:

Job coverage. FEPC must cover all jobs, jobs in private industry as well as government and defense jobs.

Right to a hearing. FEPC must provide for the right of aggrieved individuals or groups to initiate complaints and to receive hearings.

Power to investigate. FEPC must be provided sufficient funds and have the independent right to investigate complaints, including the power to subpoena witnesses.

Power to enforce. FEPC must have specific enforcement authority which will include the right to

penalize and to enforce penalties to the fullest extent of the law and the right to deny any government contract to, and the use of any government facilities by, any employer who violates FEPC.⁸⁷

A special meeting was called by the Chicago NLC on January 5, 1952, to launch the drive. Sam Parks said of the campaign:

The Cincinnati convention of our organization forced President Truman to issue a toothless fair employment order. We will not be satisfied with such half-measures. Our regional conference will demonstrate our determination to win an FEPC with teeth in it. The Freedom Train will not be sidetracked by Truman's demagoguery.⁸⁸

At a conference of the Greater Detroit NLC on February 23, 1952, jobs and FEPC were the main issues on the agenda. Joe Morgan related:

The Common Council, quibbling over the legality of an FEP ordinance, is blind to the inhuman effects of joblessness for thousands of Negro men and women, who form the largest percentage of any line at the unemployment compensation offices or the Welfare Stations. FEPC legislation is being knifed in Lansing where three FEPC measures have already died in committee.⁸⁹

The founding convention of the Hartford, Conn. chapter of NLC, where Vicki Garvin made the keynote address, adopted a goal of 10,000 signatures on the FEPC petition.⁹⁰

With the collection of signatures proceeding all over the country, NNLC planned a Washington gathering in May. Congress had given no recognition to the employment problems of Black workers except to hold hearings in the Senate on the Humphrey (D.-Minn.) FEP bill.

At that Washington meeting there were 258 delegates from a dozen states, including 93 members and 15 national officers.

representing 30 Councils. There was an East Coast motorcade of 50 cars. Besides Senator Humphrey, the group met with Senate Majority Leader Ernest W. MacFarland (D.-Ariz); Senator Styles Bridges (R.-N.H.); Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn (D.-Tex.); House Minority Leader John McCormack (D.-Mass.); and Senator Irving M. Ives (R.-N.Y.), forcing each of them to speak to the issue at hand.

When Senator MacFarland said the government had no power to pass the FEPC, Edward Logan, a leader of the Philadelphia chapter,

... replied that President Truman had assumed the power to send American boys to die in Korea without even consulting Congress. James Tate of Hartford NLC added that it seemed that Truman "has every power regardless of Congress, the courts and the Constitution except the power to protect the civil rights of the Negro people."⁹¹

The delegates also presented several other resolutions:

A demand for repeal of the Smith Act, the Taft-Hartley Act, and the McCarran Act, and defeat of the new Smith bill to seize unions.

A demand for a "speedy conclusion" of the Korean War; the return of all American military forces to their homeland and the prompt beginning of negotiations among major powers of issues which threaten peace.

A demand that the U.S. representatives in the United Nations support the demand for an end of the apartheid system in South Africa.

A demand that the State Department return to Paul Robeson the right to travel abroad.⁹²

The Senate Labor Committee approved Humphrey's bill in June, but it was later defeated on the floor of the Senate.

As the signature campaign went on, the government sought to take measures against it. For example, Walter E. Barnett,

a member of the Louisville NLC executive committee, who worked in the Army's Jeffersonville Quartermaster Depot in North Carolina, was fired for circulating the FEPC petition. After a three-month suspension, he was recalled because of protests by labor, the Black church, and progressive groups. In July of 1952 he was again suspended on formal charges of membership and activities in the NLC and the Progressive Party. This time he lost his job.⁹³

NNLC also pressured unions to adopt a model contract clause which read:

The company agrees that it will not discriminate in the hiring of employees, or in their training, upgrading, promotion, transfer, layoff, discipline, discharge or otherwise, because of race, creed, national origin, political affiliation, sex, or marital status.⁹⁴

River Rouge, home of the giant Ford plant, saw a major NLC campaign around FEPC, where the issue was placed on the ballot and won by a vote of 4,195 to 3,180, making River Rouge the first city in Michigan to have an FEPC. It was won by decisive support from white voters: At least 1,200 whites voted for it, thus disproving the argument that militant struggle around FEPC would be racially divisive.

The River Rouge FEPC provided up to 60 days in jail and a \$200 fine for persons who "discriminate in employment because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin or ancestry."⁹⁵

This writer found little information on the activities of the NNLC after 1952 around FEPC. That they continued to struggle around what was considered a central issue seems certain from conversations with former members. This is also indicated in an article appearing in 1953:

One of the very encouraging elements in the picture is the development of many full-time fighters in this struggle as leaders of the national and area bodies of the National Negro Labor Council. Those councils work from modest offices and collect nickels and dimes from the workers to keep going. But they

are the spark plugs of some of the big things we see developing in labor as a whole.⁹⁶

The article goes on to single out FEPC as one of those issues and makes the claim that NNLC helped make it an issue that labor could not avoid.

The full role of the NNLC, however, as well as the broader outlines of the FEPC fight--state campaigns, participation of the NAACP, Elks and other fraternal orders--is a story yet to be told.

Second Convention

On October 20, 1952, UE District 4 sent out copies of the call which the NNLC had issued for its Second Annual Convention to be held November 21-23 in the Cleveland Municipal Auditorium. The UE letter said:

Once the hub of the wheel of discrimination is broken, then will crumble the other evils that are linked with it, such as an unorganized South which allows for runaway shops to low wage area; a minimum wage law which is inadequate and keeps the whole wage structure below the level of a decent standard of living...

We in UE can surely understand the progress that can come from struggle. We in UE must surely appreciate the fact that a program upon which we have embarked many years ago is bringing forth a militant ally to the labor movement--the Negro people.

It is our duty, our responsibility to our brothers and sisters to aid in this struggle for equality and by doing so put insurance on everybody's hope for a brighter, happier future.⁹⁷

In its first year, the Council had grown to 35 chapters,

from Seattle to Washington, D.C. and from New England to Louisville. The call urged all Black workers and their allies, and all organizations of the Black people, to come together to chart the next steps in the fight for "Full Freedom."

The delegates gathered in Cleveland, chilled by the 35-miles-an-hour wind but warmed by the great Paul Robeson, who spoke at the opening session on Friday night. He told of the work the Council had done to organize concerts for him around the country:

[T]his past spring and summer I went across the land in what to me was an unprecedented and organized concert tour. In practically every city it was the local chapters of the Labor Council which spearheaded and organized the concerts. You made it possible--in Seattle, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Denver, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Chicago, Newark and other cities--for an artist to sing to thousands who had not heard him in person before. You made it possible because when problems arose (there are still some people, you know, who think I ought to keep my mouth shut, even in song) you made the issue an issue for all Negroes and all men and women who love democracy and support the Constitution.⁹⁸

He expressed his deep pleasure to be with "the folks" and his commitment "never to forget the soil from which I spring."

He introduced William Marshall, a rising young actor who had recently starred in "Green Pastures." Marshall had defied the threat of blacklisting to speak at the convention. His career was to suffer in the years that followed. A highlight of the evening was the performance of "The Scab," about which Abner Berry wrote:

The play... was performed on a bare stage. But so realistic was the writing and the action that the tense audience cried during scenes where the Negro wife and mother fought alone for her husband's and her people's honor.⁹⁹

The play, by Oscar Brown, Jr., a young Black writer, dealt

with a Black scab in a Chicago strike, the impact of his action on his family, and his final reuniting with them and his fellow workers against the employers and their agents. It had been written as part of the struggle to free Harold Ward, a leader of the UE-Farm Equipment local at International Harvester and a staunch NLC supporter. During a hard-fought 12-week strike earlier that fall, Ward had been framed on a murder charge. Brown wrote "The Scab" in one night, took it to Ernest Thompson, who agreed to sponsor it, and it was performed all over the mid-west.

The convention later passed a "Resolution on the Defense of Harold Ward" which was an impassioned appeal to save his life. It said in part:

It is not the first time that militant trade unionists have been the victims of a frame-up plot. Americans remember with shame the frame-ups of Tom Mooney and Sacco Vanzetti. It is not the first time that Negro workers have been the victims of a legal frame-up. We recall with shame and bitter indignation the Willie McGhee case and the Martinsville Seven, just to mention a few...

The National Negro Labor Council is determined that nothing shall be spared to save Harold Ward. Nothing shall be left undone to defend this great trade union leader and fighter for the Negro people...¹⁰⁰

The united effort of many groups helped lead to his acquittal on December 2, 1952.

The work of the next convention day began with a keynote address by William Hood. He said:

[W]e return to Ohio as though our forefathers and mothers--those great freedom fighters of the underground railroad, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass--had called us back to warn us that democracy in the United States is in its twilight zone. We have come back to Ohio to say that we will keep the pledge we made last year--that the fight for economic, political and social

freedom which they began will not be in vain. Yes, we are back to say that the walls of Jimcrow will come tumbling down. WE WILL BE FREE!¹⁰¹
(Emphasis in original.)

He went on, referring to those who attacked the Council:

The New Negro isn't fooling about where he is going from here... No official of any union nor any power on earth, will keep us apart from the millions of white workers in mine, mill and factory with whom we share the common burden of a brutal and unlicensed exploitation. The National Negro Labor Council was founded--and exists today--to help further unite, not separate, all sons and daughters of labor, whatever their race, creed, color or national origin!¹⁰²

Hood declared:

To the 16 million Negro people we say: The National Negro Labor Council has pooled the great strength of your Black working sons and daughters. We represent the Negro people's greatest striking power!... Let us keep in mind that if in the struggle to win security, job equality, for ownership of the land, we workers and farmers fail, then the doctor, the lawyer, the shopkeeper, and the church, all of whom depend on us, will be in bad shape.¹⁰³

Following his speech, 200 delegates from Detroit came forward to shake his hand, some with tears in their eyes.

The delegates adjourned for a mass demonstration against the discrimination practiced by American Airlines. Joined by members and supporters of the Cleveland NLC and led by Sam Parks, they surged forward, 2,000 strong. They marched four abreast to East 9th Street and Euclid Avenue, the airline's office, to emphasize the demand for hiring Black pilots, flight personnel, and office workers, with signs saying, "End American Airlines Jim Crow," "Negro Pilots Fly in Korea--Why Not in America?," "We Want Negro Stewardesses," and "American Airlines are Un-American!" They chanted, "Jim Crow must go, we shall not be moved." And they sang what the Cleveland Plain Dealer later referred to as a "communist" song, "Solidarity

Forever," to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic!"

As the chants bounced off the walls of the Cleveland business district, Black bus and taxi drivers tooted horns in solidarity. One Black street cleaner laid down his broom and shovel and joined the picketline. Marchers asked him, "What about your job, brother?" and he replied, "There will always be sweepers' jobs." The line gave him a mighty "Freedom Train" welcome.¹⁰⁴

Other events at the convention included a speech by Coleman Young, reviewing the highlights of the year's work. As he summed it up:

That power organized by the Negro Labor Council to struggle will win through. Our Freedom Train is rolling, brothers and sisters. Let us go among the people, the workers, Negro and white, singing, "Get on board, little children, there's room for many a more."¹⁰⁵

In all, there were 1,256 people from 26 states, including 45 from South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Texas and Mississippi, in attendance at the convention.¹⁰⁶

Hugh Mulzac, first Black captain of a ship in the U.S. Merchant Marine, and Mrs. Harry Ward were among those who addressed the delegates.

The decisions of the convention included:

Continue the campaigns to get jobs for Negroes in all industries, with concentrated effort on the Sears, Roebuck chain, hotels, railroads, and airlines.

Continue the campaign to get one million signatures on the petition for FEPC and efforts for inclusion of FEPC clauses in union contracts.

Fight for repeal of the Smith, McCarran and McCarran-Walter laws and defense of the victims of those laws.

Reaffirm solidarity with liberation movements of colonial peoples, especially against the South African

white supremacists.

Take special actions in the interests of Negro women workers.¹⁰⁷

The convention also adopted a pledge to struggle on the cultural front and to develop a people's theatre. The Council pledged to seek to organize artists, materials and outlets for the cultural output of Blacks "dammed up and frustrated by white supremacists who either ignore Negro culture or seek to subvert it into 'entertainment' for rich whites."¹⁰⁸

In describing the convention, Abner Berry said:

National Negro Labor Council conventions combine a clearcut working class program for Negro rights with the folkways and culture of the Negro people, couched in the rich imagery of the poem and the sermon. There is an added dimension to these gatherings which eludes the ordinary journalistic organization of facts.

For example, to the trained and naked eye, the convention represented 1,256 delegates working out a program for Negro freedom. But this dry fact was transmuted into a "Freedom Train," with passengers listening to the "rumble of a dream too long deferred."¹⁰⁹

This ability to mobilize the many-sided richness of the people's experience was a powerful weapon in the hands of the Negro Labor Council.

Rails

The rails campaign was projected as early as the first convention of the NNLC. It was reiterated at the second convention in a "resolution from the Railroad Industry" which set out clearly the general situation of Black workers in the industry:

That Negro workers and other minority groups working in the Railroad industry face untold

discrimination and Jim Crow policies that have long been abolished by most workers in other crafts.

Most or all carriers have maintained Jim Crow hiring policies in all higher classifications and crafts of the industry, relegating Negro workers in the main to the classifications of Porters, Waiters, Cooks, Coach Attendants, and other menial classifications.

That the Big 4 Brotherhoods of the Railroad Industry, railroad engineers, railroad firemen, railroad conductors and flagmen and brakemen, have supported and cooperated with the carriers by maintaining these jobs under their jurisdiction lily-white, through clauses in their contracts and constitutions barring Negroes and other minority groups in their unions.

That the government, through contracts for mail carrying, troop transportation, and the carrying of freight with the carriers without insisting on democratic hiring policies have buttressed the Jim Crow hiring policy of the industry. And through the Railway Labor Act have a direct responsibility in regulating the Labor and Management relationship dealing with collective bargaining in the industry.

[T]he changing of the locomotive power from steam engines to diesel engines, thus speeding up the moving of all trains, has further decreased the Negro workers in this industry.¹¹⁰

The resolution called on the Council to take up the fight to smash jim crow on the rails and force the carriers to adopt an FEP clause.

This was the main issue at the third convention. Coleman Young said of the campaign:

No industry holds greater drama in the struggle of the Negro people, past and present, than does the

railroad industry. If Negro and white trade unionists and other democratic groups are willing to seize upon this history, upon this drama, we can present to America the most far-reaching democratic job campaign ever witnessed in America. We believe they are ready.¹¹¹

The importance of the campaign lay in the lost history of the relationship between the Black people and the railroads. NLC wrote:

It is no accident that the legendary hero of the great era of railroad expansion was a Negro worker [John Henry], for it was largely the Negro working people, together with the Irish immigrants, who performed the tremendous job of constructing the vast network of rails that physically united this country... But there is no hiding or ignoring the brutal jim crow set-up on railroad jobs today. And no plan for Negro freedom by '63 can be complete without spelling out the program for victory over railroad jim crow.¹¹²

In the late 1800's and the early part of this century, Blacks were employed in almost every branch of the rail industry and throughout every state, though largely confined to the dirtiest and lowest paying jobs as laborers and porters. The rail industry had historically used the Black workers to keep down the wages of both white and Black employees. Most recently it had entered upon a policy of systematically excluding Blacks from the industry. In so doing, it was supported by the government. As pointed out by the historians, Spero and Harris,

Southern railway managements, hostile to trade unionism, frankly used the Negro to weaken the organizations which barred him from membership. They used him to depress the current wage standard. Engineers were obliged to be cautious for fear that the roads might some day decide to employ colored engineers. White foremen and trainmen who faced direct Negro competition were obliged to accept lower wages and less favorable employment contracts in "Negro territory" than firemen and trainmen in other parts of the country.¹¹³

The railroads developed the practice of using the Black workers as "a source of cheap labor and as a means of disuniting the rail workers by on the one hand hiring Negroes at sub-standard wages, and on the other fostering the vilest forms of racism backed by the argument that the exploited Negro workers were unfair competition for the almost equally exploited white workers."¹¹⁴

Some examples of the workings of this exploitation were given by the NNLC in its pamphlet called, "Let Freedom Ride the Rails:"

In 1909 the Georgia Railroad fired 10 white hostlers whose wages were \$1.75 a day, and replaced them with Negroes at a 50¢ cut.

In 1917 several Southern carriers made agreements to pay Negroes \$1.75 for the same run that white firemen were paid \$2.27--a 52¢ hourly difference.

Negro train porters have been used for a long time to do brakemen's work. While the porter receives a few cents more for doing this added work, his pay is much less than that of the brakemen.¹¹⁵

The white workers fell into the trap of white chauvinism laid for them by the industry, and the Big Four Brotherhoods all excluded Blacks from membership. In the 1920's and at other times there were bloody strikes as the white workers sought to force Black workers out of their jobs. In 1890 there had been more than 6,000 Black firemen and trainmen; by 1940 this number dropped to 2,000. Ten years later, Blacks were less than 2% of the Southern firemen.¹¹⁶

Through the Railway Labor Act and the Mediation Board, the government aided and abetted the policies of the unions and employers. According to the NNLC:

This persistent bias on the part of the government and its agencies responsible for handling important questions affecting working conditions of Negro workers as well as white workers obviously demands serious examination and prompt modification. As things now stand, at no level--through the key unions

or the government--are Negro railroad workers permitted representation, voice or vote. This air-tight exclusion is not defensible on any ground. It must be changed.¹¹⁷

Despite overwhelming opposition, the Black workers struggled valiantly to keep their jobs, founding their own unions where they could, as in non-operating crafts, such as Pullman porters, dining car waiters and red caps. In other crafts where Blacks were a minority excluded from the Brotherhoods they also established their own unions. The Railway Labor Executives Committee, composed of Colored Railway & Locomotive Firemen, Colored Trainmen of America, Dining Car & Food Workers Union, and the Southern Association of Colored Railway Trainmen & Firemen helped coordinate activities.

They struggled for justice also through the courts and in hearings of the wartime FEPC, with a singular lack of success. One authority revealed that of 57 seniority cases of Black railroad men coming before the courts prior to 1940, only eight were decided in their favor.¹¹⁸

The first breakthrough came with the victory of Bester W. Steele and Tom Tunstall, with Charles Houston as counsel, who took their cases all the way to the Supreme Court. On December 18, 1944, the Court ruled that in view of the existing national non-discrimination policy, all railroad contracts were invalid and illegal insofar as they discriminated against Blacks.¹¹⁹

The railroads and the Brotherhoods flagrantly ignored the decision. What was needed, the NNLC said, was "a mass campaign... to implement not just individually but on a wide scale the court decisions preserving and protecting job rights of Negroes already at work, and to win the fight for democratic hiring."¹²⁰

The NNLC held a series of meetings with workers in the industry and developed plans for an all-out national campaign. By late November of 1953 NNLC announced that it had come to full agreement on the plan. It was the main concern at the Council's third convention.

Following the convention, NNLC developed literature, including "Let Freedom Ride the Rails," a comprehensive piece which was advertised "as more than a book--an education." Its clear and sophisticated analysis was enhanced by the illustrations of the talented Black artist, Elwood Dean. Fifty thousand

copies were distributed.

The initial action on February 24, 1954, was a letter from NNLC to Richard M. Nixon, then Vice-President of the United States:

We would like to call to your attention at this time a long-standing, most flagrant and widespread violation of federal non-discriminatory requirements in government contracts, carried on, without exception by the various railroad systems throughout the length and breadth of the United States. No industry in America draws a greater revenue from the government subsidy than do the railroads. And it is a matter of public knowledge that no industry more arrogantly defies all executive, legislative and judicial precepts, as well as publicly recognized moral concepts, of fair employment practices.

As the federal agency specifically formed for this purpose we urgently request that you immediately launch a full scale investigation, with open public hearings, of the discriminatory hiring and employment practices of the railroad industry, with the view of recommending the withholding of all federal funds from the railroads until such time as they live up to the federally required non-discriminatory clauses in their contracts. ¹²¹

As the campaign got underway other forces came into it. The Elks, largest Black fraternal order at that time, gave it special consideration at their national convention in 1954. The Amsterdam News ran a long article on the general council meeting at the Hotel Theresa where the railroads were the main issue. ¹²²

NNLC also urged Black workers to apply for railroad jobs in restricted classifications and, in those states with FEPC laws, to report all refusals. In New York, the State Committee Against Discrimination agreed to hear some of the cases that the New York NLC was instrumental in having filed. In New York and Pennsylvania a crack was made as a result of the campaign and a few Blacks were hired as firemen and trainmen. Some Black workers were admitted in the Brotherhoods. ¹²³

By the time of NNLC's dissolution, the President's Committee on Government Contract Compliance had finally agreed to accept jurisdiction over the railroads.

The NNLC summed up:

Here, as in the airlines situation, victory is in sight--but it would be naive to believe that the mighty railroad monopoly which on previous occasions has been big enough and bad enough to successfully defy Franklin D. Roosevelt's FEPC on the issue of hiring Negroes, will give up easily in the effort to preserve and increase the millions of dollars of profit that the railway owners have stolen from Negro workers by the device of job discrimination.¹²⁴

Third Convention

The third annual convention was held in Chicago, December 4-6, 1953. The major issue was discrimination in the railroad industry. As Coleman Young described it:

In no other industry do Negro workers have a more glorious history of long time services. In no other industry is the discriminatory job pattern more vicious, while at the same time the railroads are supported largely by taxpayers, Negro as well as white, in the form of government subsidies.

The current trend in railroad employment is toward the complete elimination of Negro workers. In the South, where Negroes have held many operational positions, such as firemen and brakemen, since the beginning of the industry, they are now being eliminated.

We intend to put an end to this outrageous situation. We can see no reason that Negro workers should not be employed at all levels by the railroads, including conductors and engineers.¹²⁵

The attendance at the third convention represented both

the success of the work carried on by the Councils and the increasingly intense repression against the left, the NNLC, and the Black people. There were 757 delegates from 17 states. While this was a smaller number of delegates than at previous conventions, there was a much larger participation of workers from AFL unions and Railroad unions.

Considering that between the second and third conventions the NNLC had been placed on the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations, it was a large gathering.

Bill Hood was not present at the convention: He had been forced out of the Council under pressure from the UAW. Young gave the keynote address, entitled "These Things We Fight for Will be Ours." He called on the delegates:

Negro brothers and sisters, white brothers and sisters, this is our time to move! Our country has got to move! The Government is going to have to move! Industry is going to have to move; the trade unions had better move! The churches, fraternities, schools and every living American institution is forced to move to protect the moral and democratic integrity of our country.¹²⁶

In a restatement of the "Bill of Particulars," he described how the economic situation of Black workers had continued to degenerate. From the "Report of the President's Committee on Government Contract Compliance" he read that the average annual income of Black families was \$1,869, which was only 54 per cent of the average income of \$3,445 earned by white families.¹²⁷ And he said:

Make no mistake about it. This is why we are here today. We say "justify this jimcrow treatment of your Black sons and daughters, America--or wipe it out!"¹²⁷

Among the highlights of the convention was Paul Robeson's speech on Friday night to a mass meeting of 1,500. He spoke of the increasing repression and the valiant fight of working class leaders such as Ben Gold, Ernest DeMaio, and Asbury Howard to turn the tide. He spoke of his own virtual house arrest and the persecution of the Council on African Affairs, but he added:

I am confident, and I am happy. Confident that we shall win peace and abolish war in our times. Happy that under the sterling leadership of the officers of this Council, the Negro workers are playing a bigger and bigger part in the battle for full and equal citizenship. It has been a long time. But the fact that you are meeting, and that you will not be turned back means that it will not be as long as it has been. You are the future. I salute you.¹²⁸

The work in the South was the other highlight, led off by a report entitled "Free Our Hand," prepared by Viola Brown, Asbury Howard and Sterling Neal.* It discussed how the South had for years been a colony of big business, how Wall Street had moved in and taken over the rich natural resources and basic industries, and how it had recently moved to exploit another natural resource--cheap labor. The South's pattern of white supremacy permitted the companies to pit Black and white workers against each other to keep wages low. Thus even the wages of white workers were lower than in the North and this "Southern differential" had worked "like gravity" to bring down the living standards of all workers, North and South.

Yet, the report said, it was possible to struggle against this, citing the work of UE-Farm Equipment at the International Harvester plant in Louisville, where after seven years of resisting union-busting and red-baiting the union had achieved the highest pay in mass production in the South. What is more, during the petition campaign for an FEPC, a leaflet was given to white workers which pointed out their self-interest and the result was that of 5,000 signatures collected, the majority were from white workers.

But, it said: "We need help. We need money, literature, and organizational assistance:"

* Viola Brown was a regional vice-president of the NNLC and a member of the Winston-Salem Council; Asbury Howard was a vice-president at-large from Bessemer, Alabama; Sterling Neal was also a vice-president at-large, coming from the Louisville Council.

The struggles now taking place in the South are key to the overall struggle of working people to throw off the yoke of oppression all over America. With grave economic problems facing our country growing out of the cold war, and the man's program of fascism in an attempt to ride out the threatening depression, it behooves all of us to support the struggles of the Negro people in the South for full freedom and for unity. THERE CAN BE NO FULL FREEDOM OF THE NEGRO PEOPLE IN OTHER SECTIONS OF THE COUNTRY UNLESS THE BLACK BELT OF THE SOUTH IS SET FREE! THERE CAN BE NO FREE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN AMERICA UNTIL THE SOUTH IS ORGANIZED ON A DEMOCRATIC BASIS! ...

Give us these tools and we will not only make the South a safer place to live, but a safer place for those Negroes who left to come back to.

All we ask is that you free our hand!

Mary Robertson, a young white woman from Asheville, North Carolina, electrified the audience with her short speech in the discussion which followed:

The white workers of the South are not so bigoted that they can eat a "white only" sign. We're hungry and we know that if Negro workers get their due, we will be able to eat, too.¹³⁰

The resolutions of the convention included:

Fight on railroad jim crow

Fight for jobs for Negroes on a mass industrial basis, singling out in the South the fight for Negro skilled jobs in the tobacco and textile industries.

Opposition to McCarthyism, especially as it strikes at Negro and trade union rights; and rejection of the McCarthyite big lie of the "Communist danger" and "Communist conspiracy."

An annual Negro Women's Day and week, coupled with

a program for the full rights of women in industry.

A heightened fight for the right of Negro cultural workers and for a closer integration of Negro culture with the Negro people's freedom movement.¹³¹

Staunch opposition to McCarthyism was again a clear and ringing note at the convention. As one delegate said,

We Negroes know what McCarthyism is: We have been its victims for hundreds of years. We have been made to suffer for being Negroes and for being in association with Negroes.¹³²

Chatman Wailes, secretary of the Chicago Council, summed up the mass meeting and the convention as

... a testimony to the fact that the people of Chicago are interested in the Council's program and ready to enter a new stage in the fight for equal job rights.¹³³

Later Activity

Activities of the Council from 1953 to April of 1956, when it dissolved, are hazy. They included the rail campaign, most of the Gateway to the South Campaign and various local campaigns.

The outstanding local campaign was the activity of the New Jersey chapter in the election of the first Black city councilman in Newark. It began with changing the form of government from commission (all officials elected at-large) to mayor-council (some representatives elected from wards, some at-large). Under the commission form it had proven impossible for Blacks, women and other minorities to gain representation and the government had remained in the hands of a small ruling clique. Beginning in 1953, the labor movement, the Catholic Church, liberals, the Black community and the Chamber of Commerce, which was then fighting gangster control, joined in the struggle for change of government.¹³⁴ The NLC participated vigorously, passing out 25,000 leaflets in the Black community in support of change.

The citizens, Black and white, voted overwhelmingly in support of change.

The law, provided for dividing the City into five wards. In one of these, the Central Ward, Blacks were slightly more than half the population. There was an attempt by the Ward Commissioners to gerrymander the Central Ward to prevent election of a Black to the Council. Council leader Clarence Coggins brought out the Census Bureau figures which documented that the Ward Commissioners had misrepresented the population count to establish the gerrymander. The Census Bureau backed the NCL's figures and when the issue was taken to court the gerrymander was thrown out.¹³⁵

A tough election campaign followed. What was needed was a candidate who would inspire and mobilize the greatest possible Black unity, while picking up enough white votes to defeat the white candidate, John Salvato. The Council backed Irvine Turner and were joined in support by the CIO and others. NLC did the main leg work, including canvassing, running sound trucks and leafletting. The Council was key in bringing white workers into the campaign to canvass in the white areas. Turner's opponents smeared him in every way and red-baited the Council. The Council replied by running a campaign based on all-class unity and the need for Black representation.

Part of the Council's idea was to develop the aspirations of the people for representation and for dignity in their daily lives. When Salvato, for example, showed up one Sunday in a Black church, the people chased him out. Yet it was not an anti-white campaign, for the people needed coalition in order to win. Turner, in spite of intimidation, called for outlawing the H-bomb, defeat of McCarthyism, repeal of the McCarran-Walter and Smith Acts, public works, housing, slum clearance and an end to police brutality.¹³⁷

Turner won in a run-off, through the support of both white and Black voters. It was the first time that a Black had broken through the solid white front of municipal government in New Jersey. It started a chain of elections that echoed up and down the state, with Council leaders playing a leading role in many of them. Black people became more conscious of the question of dignity and the power they could win in struggle.

Gateway to the South Campaign

The Gateway to the South campaign began with the struggle in 1952 of the local NLC to convince the Louisville Board of Education to train Blacks for jobs that would open in GE's Appliance Park. The roots of the campaign went back to the war period and the first breakthrough of Black workers into industry.¹³⁹

After World War II, many workers, both white and Black, were thrown out of jobs. Out on the streets, collecting unemployment and looking for work, they turned to the new plants which were coming into the area to take advantage of the Southern differential. One of these was International Harvester, which had a near monopoly on production of farm equipment. Harvester hired Blacks only as janitors and maintenance workers. The workers struggled with the company, on the basis of a no-discrimination agreement, for the right to be upgraded. Using that as a base, they were able to get many Black workers into the plant. They established a Black caucus to discuss their common problems and prepare themselves for union meetings.

That shop was organized as Local 236 of the Farm Equipment Workers. The organizing campaign was a battleground on the question of Black-white unity, described in a UE pamphlet called "The Louisville Story:"

[M]any workers attracted to FE were confused by these tactics [red-baiting and Negro-baiting]. They came to the FE men with questions. The FE men steadfastly refused to compromise. Instead they sat down and explained that the policy of the union was economic equality for all. They explained how the only way to beat Harvester's low wages was to unite the Negro and white workers. They explained how the southern bosses for generations had played Negro workers against white, and white against Negro. They pointed out that there was a direct connection between this and the fact that southern workers were the lowest-paid in the country. Many of the workers had not thought of this before. They had for years been fighting a losing battle with the cost of living, struggling to get along, and not knowing why. Now they began to see that in real unity lay hope for a

better living and better life. They saw that they could, if they refused to be divided, force the boss to pay them a decent wage.¹⁴⁰

Once the workers understood, they struggled militantly for their rights. Offered 90¢ an hour, they saw that this was 70¢ or 80¢ lower than Harvester workers in Chicago were getting. They fought until the company erased its Southern differential.

This struggle, which had gone on over many years, was one of the important roots of the NLC. Out of that Harvester plant and FE local came powerful Black leaders of the Council. Their own experience had taught them that "equality within unity and unity through equality" was possible. They did not just accept NNLC policy, they were a vigorous force in shaping it. In the Report from the South to the Third Convention and similar reports to general Council meetings, the Southern leaders urged the Council to attack discrimination in the South as basic to success everywhere. This came to the fore around the Gateway campaign. The active Louisville Council had from the beginning an outlook of fighting jim crow at Appliance Park. They were also involved in some successful campaigns around the local breweries and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, which hired Blacks only in menial positions. Facing the campaign around GE, the Council sought to reach out to and unify the broadest possible sections of the Black community and their white allies.

The outlook was that GE should hire no fewer Blacks at Appliance Park than the ratio they bore to the total Louisville population: Louisville was 17 per cent Black. The plant opened operations in early 1953. By the time 5,000 of the estimated 16,000 workers had been hired, only 156 were Blacks. Only 10 of those were Black women, despite the fact that approximately half the work force was women.¹⁴¹

All the Negro women work in the menial capacity of "matron," which is a glorified name for toilet-cleaner and scrubwoman. Eighty-three (83) of the 146 Negro men are janitors. The remaining 63 have been up-graded to jobs in assembly, lift, machine operation, and one is a set-up man.¹⁴²

The NNLC at its general Council meeting in the spring of

1953 agreed to undertake a national campaign on the situation. Young announced:

The opening gun in the drive has already been fired in Louisville, where the local council has spearheaded a community drive to win 3,000 jobs for Negro men and women at General Electric's Appliance Park plant.

We are dealing with a conspiracy by the NAM, the US Chamber of Commerce, and leaders of government in Congress to push down wages despite the rising cost of living by inviting business firms in the North, East and West to pull up stakes, go South and open new plants, hiring workers in the area at lower wages than those paid to Northern workers.

Through a strict jim crow hiring policy they are depriving Negro workers of jobs in order to insure that a cheap labor reserve shall be maintained in the hope of breaking strikes and undermining the entire trade union movement.¹⁴³

In April of 1953, the NNLC sent a letter to James Carey of the IUE, which was the bargaining agent at Appliance Park, and to Walter Reuther of the UAW, George Meany, head of the AFL, and Albert Fitzgerald, president of the UE, as well as to the Louisville Central Trades Council, in which they said it was in the interests of all labor to take part in the fight and asked for support. Only the UE was willing to come into the fight.

It became increasingly clear that the Louisville Council could not do the job alone. As Thompson expressed it in a press release:

We have proposed to GE in meetings, communications, and public statements that they adopt this policy and under no condition hire a smaller percentage of Negroes than they bear to the total population of the community.

While the GE officials here have issued pious statements there has been no one indication of the Company's good will or serious intention to offer democratic job opportunities...

My experience with GE in countless skirmishes with them at their New Jersey plants, Newark, Bloomfield, Trenton, at Schenectady, New York, and in numerous plants in Ohio, etc. convinces me that only a battle with this company will change the picture. After numerous efforts to change their policy, many plants still do not have a single Negro worker.

This situation is urgent because if Negro workers are to gain seniority and job opportunity, a break in the situation must come now. Otherwise, they will be frozen out and heaped at the bottom...

The right to work in our highly industrialized society is the most burning issue of our time...¹⁴⁵

On November 10, 1954, the National NLC announced the opening of a drive to win equal job opportunities in the Louisville area. Young stated in the press release:

The right of Negro workers to equal access to production jobs in the South has become a critical test of democracy in America today in view of increasing runaway of big plants from industrial cities of the North. As a result of this vast runaway movement, Louisville, "the Gateway to the South," has emerged as a new and growing industrial center with at least 30,000 jobs opening up in the next six months.¹⁴⁶

Those 30,000 jobs included 6,000 new jobs at GE and 4,500 new jobs at Ford. The fight for a fair share of these jobs was to be linked with the campaign against the L & N Railroad.

Workers in GE shops across the country began to call upon their local management to protest GE's policies in Louisville; other locals and organizations sent protests and delegations to GE; in New York the Council manned a picketline at GE's home office two days a week, sometimes having 400-500 on the line; 100,000 copies of a leaflet entitled "Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread," with a picture of a Black woman striker on the front, were distributed.*

*There were two Louisville pamphlets with this title, the other having a drawing by famed Black artist Charles White on the cover.

In Detroit the mobilization began with Young and other NLC leaders leafletting at Local 600 on February 11, 1955. The leaflet read:

Today: READ THIS LEAFLET!

Tomorrow: GIVE YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE "LET
FREEDOM CRASH THE GATEWAY TO THE SOUTH" CAMPAIGN!

It related the campaign to the Ford workers' interest in defeating the runaway shop movement and wiping out discrimination at the Ford plant in Louisville. While the distribution was under way, police arrived and arrested Young along with Nadine Baxter and Louis Harley of UAW Local 261. By the time they were taken into custody, they had already sold \$50 worth of campaign buttons.¹⁴⁷

Nelson Davis, an active NLC member and Local 600 leader, and other workers took over the leafletting. The police left them alone.

The Ford workers were incensed that Young had been arrested. They bought over \$100 worth of buttons. The Greater Detroit NLC then issued leaflets exposing the full story of Ford discrimination in Louisville, Ford being even worse than GE: Out of 400 workers, only four were Black, and all were janitors.

The UAW became caught up in the Gateway campaign. Under pressure from Local 600, the Fair Employment Practices Department and the union were forced to investigate Ford's hiring policies in Louisville and to pressure Ford to hire Black production workers.

A major victory was that Black women were given the right to work as production workers. As expressed in "Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread,"

Of the eight thousand people now working in the GE Louisville plant, approximately 50 per cent are women. Over a two-year period only ten Negro women were hired, and they are confined to such duties as scrub-women and toilet cleaning. It was not until after charges of discrimination were filed with the President's Committee on Government Contract Compliance that GE suddenly decided that Negro women

could be production workers in the South. So they hired two Negro women as production workers to try to hide their shame. This brings the grand total of Negro [women] workers to twelve...

In ads across the land GE glorifies American womanhood--in her GE kitchen, at her GE washer, before her GE television--all but the Negro women who seek a job in GE shops...¹⁴⁸

The Council issued a special pamphlet called "GE Discrimination Against Negro Women" showing the pattern of GE's exclusion of Black workers, but especially Black women, all over the country. In all of the literature put out, the Council pointed out how this discrimination put extra billions of profit into the hands of the bosses and took money from the workers. As they put it, "The payoff for the white worker is a permanent lower standard of living (now \$648 a year less than white workers in the North)."¹⁴⁹

Under a continuous assault of advertisements, protests, demonstrations, and legal action through the President's Committee, GE and Ford were forced to back down.

Both Ford and GE finally retreated in the face of the united demands of the national campaign. A few Negro women (in what must be considered a precedent shattering move in the South) were placed on production at GE and now, after some twenty years, the Ford Motor Company in Louisville has finally hired Negroes above the capacity of janitor.¹⁵⁰

Ernest Thompson called it "the most exciting campaign" of his life, and the most gratifying in that it resulted not only in more jobs but also in more dignity for the Black people of the South.

Repression II

The attempts of the government to silence the NNLC never let up. It began by harassing members and stealing the organization's files. After the Second Convention, the Council was put on the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations. When the Council asked for a hearing, it was denied although the regulations provided for the right to a hearing.

In the midst of the Gateway and the Democracy in Merger campaigns, the government named the Council subversive. A hearing before the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) was set for April 30, 1956. The Council made the painful decision to disband, explaining -

In surveying the situation, the leaders of the National Negro Labor Council came to the conclusion that we would not dissipate the energies of our members attempting to raise the tremendous sums of money required to go through the SACB hearing, and at the same time, jeopardizing their personal well-being when the freedom struggle is at its present height.¹⁵¹

This move was preceded by a valiant fight for survival against vilification of the lowest order. The government in December, 1954, issued a pamphlet called "The American Negro in the Communist Party," which said of the Council:

The National Negro Labor Council deceitfully states that its purpose is the union of "all Negro workers with other suffering minorities and our allies among the white workers" in order to obtain "first-class citizenship based on economic, political, and social equality." A study of the operation of the Council shows that, rather than helping the Negro worker, it has been a deterrent to him. For example, it has made charges of Negro discrimination against the United Auto Workers, CIO, which has done much to advance the cause of the Negro worker. In fact, the Council has continuously attempted to discredit

the efforts of non-communist organizations. It has encouraged disunity, rather than unity, and thereby performed a distinct disservice to the cause of the Negro worker.¹⁵²

The response of the Council to intimidation was to repeat:

...if the Attorney General considers the demand for full freedom-economic, political and social--now, not 80 years from now, as subversive, then he had better "designate" the Negro people of America; for this is their demand, and the Negro people are surely "guilty" of fighting for freedom.

And the NNLC intends to continue to be "guilty" of fighting for freedom. We will not be intimidated, because the Negro people will not be intimidated. We are fighting for our full freedom, and we do not intend to stop fighting until we can walk with full freedom and dignity in the land of our birth.¹⁵³

The base of the NNLC--its financial base and its main membership and closest supporters--had always been the left-wing trade unions. They, too, had come under fierce attack throughout this period, and even earlier. The Marine Cooks & Stewards and the ILWU were the Council's main base on the West Coast; after 1952, both unions were locked in a struggle for survival. The UE, always one of the staunchest supporters of the Council, was split by furious red-baiting in 1956.

The middle-of-the-road and right-wing unions had no love for the NNLC and turned on it with a fury. Bill Hood had been one of the earliest victims forced out of the Council by UAW pressure. Others were also victims. Even where the leaders remained firm, as most of them did, financial support and the working relationships which the Council depended on were not forthcoming.

Thompson later said that the Council made two mistakes: It said, "Uncle Tom is dead and Massa's in the cold, cold grave." Both assumptions were premature. In addition, it had based

itself on the trade union movement, which was not prepared to play that role.

Political repression killed the Council. It was still thriving, still leading national campaigns, and still setting new goals in the Black liberation struggle when it was forced to dissolve.

Because it was still alive and a potent force, the decision to dissolve was a heart-rending one for the Council leaders. The indignation expressed in the following press release perhaps expresses the feeling:

Herbert Brownell, United States Attorney General, and chief enforcer of the law of the land, has at long last taken official action in regard to the much abused rights of Negro Americans!

But Mr. Brownell did not act in response to the nationwide demands to bring to justice the cowardly lynchers of 14-year-old Emmet Till. The Attorney General did not jail the shoot-out murderers of the Rev. George Lee in Mississippi. He did not indict the reawakening Ku Klux Klan, nor did he take action against the fascist-like White Citizens Councils, which are springing up all over the South in bold and open defiance of the Supreme Court's decisions on desegregation.

Mr. Brownell chose to ignore all these open evaders of civil rights and self-declared violators of federal statutes and authority. Instead, in his first prosecution in the general field of the struggle for Negro rights, he has singled out for attack a Negro organization that has been among the foremost exponents of constitutionally declared full freedom and first class citizenship for the Negro people.¹⁵⁴

When the convention came and the leaders met for the last time on John R. Street in Detroit on April 29, 1956, they cried. They pledged that they would retreat to the ghetto and come back fighting.

Despite official dissolution proceedings and the cessation

of functioning by the Council, the government continued its prosecution. Thompson, who by this time was out of a job, had to go to Washington twice to represent Coleman Young, designated administrator of the Council. He finally took with him a prepared statement in which he accused the Attorney General of dancing on the grave of the dead. Charging him with full knowledge that the Council was no longer in existence, Thompson said:

I therefore plead with you to halt these proceedings and relieve the Justice Department attorneys of the non-existent task of forcing the former respondent, the National Negro Labor Council, to register with the Board as "subversive." I further request the Subversive Activities Control Board to direct the Attorney General's efforts to the KKK and the White Citizens Council, who are openly practicing force and violence against the Government.¹⁵⁵

The government finally dismissed the charges.

The Council was gone, but the boost that it had given to the freedom movement could not die. In a pamphlet summing up their work and their decision to dissolve, the leaders of the Council said:

The fight for freedom goes on.

So it will be now! The striking down of the Negro Labor Council will not prevent and curtail Negro workers from organizing and fighting in the freedom fight. History will record that the shameful and fascist-like oppressions of Mr. Brownell and the other subverters of democracy were unable to stem the freedom tide.

The struggle for full citizenship for the Negro people has in recent years entered a higher phase in which millions of Negroes and white people are consciously participating, and the National Negro Labor Council played an important role in awakening the latent power of such forces and in demonstrating the methods by which victories can be won in such struggles.¹⁵⁶

Summary

The Negro Labor Council combined a solid working class base with a commitment to coalition with all classes of the Black people first and the labor movement second. Within this framework its major accomplishment was that it laid the basis for developing awareness among Black workers. Cadre within the union movement were brought forward who would never have been developed without the influence of the Council. Crucial in this regard was that it provided a way for these men and women to come together to argue out an approach to their special problems. Sometimes it would take days or weeks to hammer out the line; still, everyone had a voice and could vote in the decision. Further, the Council mobilized these forces to become active in the general liberation struggle, basing their activity on a working class outlook. The Turner campaign in Newark is one of the best examples of the role these Black workers could play with their background in organization and willingness to fight.

The development of cadre which went on across the nation did not die with the NNLC. The men and women who had been brought forward continued to play an active role in the liberation struggle. Whether it was their high degree of political sophistication or their background as workers, these men and women stayed with the freedom struggle. They were not frightened off by McCarthy. Jack Burch said of the former leaders:

One thing I think is true and I think that history will record this, that the man wasn't able to coopt the leadership of the Negro Labor Council. There were no buy-outs or sell-outs. You take every single guy that played a leadership role in the Council, with all the pressures of trade union leaders to buy off those guys in the shops, they weren't able to succeed with that.

Or the politicians that were trying to buy off the leaders to either slow down the campaign against Sears or slow down the campaign against the railroads or slow down the campaign for

hiring of the airlines. There's no single instance of a leader selling out. Our demise was caused by political repression solely.¹⁵⁷

They continued to play the same kind of role. Young became a State Senator from Detroit and subsequently its Mayor; Burch continued to work for UE District Council 11 in Chicago, as did DeMaio; Harold Smith became a City Councilman in East Orange and then Director of the Housing Authority; Clarence Coggins helped run Mayor Kenneth Gibson's campaign in Newark, as he had helped run the Turner campaign sixteen years before. As one goes down the line, the leaders of the Council are still numbered in the freedom fight.

Along with the development of cadre went the efforts of the Black workers to come together in their own organization. This was a basic struggle and took many forms during the course of NNLC's history, but it was a fundamental contribution to the movement. Young, speaking on this point, said:

We understood then that coalition meant partnership, it meant a coming together of equals. It meant putting into a common pot that which you had and taking out of the pot that which you were able to take out because of your strength. It did not mean the black man sitting on Ol' Massa's knee, which had been the definition of coalition politics, it had been the relationship of the union to the black community until that time. What I'm trying to say was most classically demonstrated in Bill Hood's speech--which was Big Train's brain child, basically--and we ... addressed ourselves to the trade union movement, and said, "We ask for your cooperation, but not your permission."¹⁵⁸

The combination of these two contributions--the creation of Black caucuses and the development of significant cadre among the Black working class--created the conditions for struggle within the trade union movement. An example is the fight within the UAW for Black representation on the executive board. NNLC advanced the slogan, "There are no inferior people, there are just inferior opportunities," and called

on Reuther to "Open the door" and let a Black come on the board.

Another aspect of significance was that the Council carried out real struggles around the rights of Black women. In doing so it raised the "woman question" to a new level within the progressive movement. Particularly under the impact of the Gateway campaign, millions of people began to look seriously at the position of women and the economic basis of their oppression.

Black workers for the first time, fought to give leadership to the Black people as a whole and this had an impact on the whole liberation movement. The NNLC in 1951 called for Full Freedom for the Black people; the NAACP in 1953 came out with its slogan, "Free by '63." The Urban League was forced to join in many job fights in a militant rather than hat-in-hand way.

NNLC's working class line--no compromise with oppression, coalition with the white working class--reflected the highest traditions of the Black liberation movement and the urgency of the people's needs. It exposed the contradictions so that they could not be ignored and in doing so forced the liberation movement, the union movement, and even the government to move forward.

NNLC had an impact on the great Black artists of the day, from Paul Robeson, for whom concerts were organized from sea to sea; to Lorraine Hansberry, who once delivered ribs to an NNLC meeting at the Hotel Theresa; to Charles White, Harry Belafonte, and Oscar Brown, Jr. Culture was seen as a crucial weapon in the fight for freedom. NNLC was fully committed to helping young artists get a start. The artists, in turn, moved by the struggles of the Council, the humanity of its day-to-day work, and the strength of its great moments, used their creative talents to tell its story to the people.

The Council won some jobs, but more importantly it opened up significant jobs campaigns, many of which were later won, as in the case of the airlines.

The one significant weakness was its choice of base. As Young said:

I think we overestimated the potential support of the trade-union movement and underestimated

the necessity of rooting ourselves in the ghetto. We needed, in retrospect, it seems to me, a more even-handed approach. I think we became embroiled and preoccupied with the politics of our respective trade unions, and we had an unrealistic concept of how far the trade union movement would go without organized pressure and support from the black community. We were 'way out in front. Life took care of that. When the man cracked down we didn't have but one place to go and that's back to the ghetto.¹⁵⁹

It is to be hoped that from that ghetto base the liberation movement will again "come back strong," as the leaders of the Council pledged to do. The destruction of the Council, together with the smashing of the left unions and the left generally in the United States was devastating to the people's movement. Twenty years later, there still exists no organization within the Black liberation movement of the political sophistication, organizational know-how, or broad base of the Council.

Harold Smith's comment on the meaning of the NNLC made in December, 1970, is relevant:

I would like to see another organization such as the NNLC come into being. Of course it will be a lot younger people than us... But we struggled. I think, too, that we made our impact upon America. I don't think, I know we made our impact because I was in that picketline too in Cleveland... I believe in the philosophy and principles of the NNLC and I think they are just as valid today as they were 15 years ago when we disbanded or 20 years ago when we started.¹⁶⁰

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